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LOS ANGELES



A L A S!

A Novel

BY

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'COMETH UP AS A FLOWER,' 'RED AS A ROSE IS SHE,' 'SECOND THOUGHTS,'
'GOOD-BYE, SWEETHEART !' 'NANCY,' 'DOCTOR CUPID,' ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES

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A L A S !



PART I.

(CONTINUED).

AMELIA.



CHAPTER XVIII.

“Ihr Blumen alle, Heraus ! Heraus !”

IT was to German flowers that the above hest was addressed. If they obey it, with how much more alacrity do the Italian ones comply with its glad command. It is a week later, and now no one can say that “the spring comes slowly up this way.” Vines, figs, and mulberries, all are emulously racing out, and the corn has added two emerald inches to its juicy blades. The young plane-trees in the Piazza d’ Azeglio, so skimpily robed when first Jim had rung the *entresol* bell of No. 12, are exchanging their “unhandsome thrift” for an apparel of plenteous

green, and a wonderful Paulownia is beginning to hold up her clusters of gloccinia bells.

Jim has watched the daily progress of the plane-leaves from the low window of No. 12's *entresol*. The daily progress? Is it possible that he has been there every day during the past week? He asks himself this, with a species of shock; and it is with a sense of relief that he finds that one whole day has intervened, during which he had not heard the sound of the electric bell thrilling through the apartment under the touch of his own fingers. What can have taken him there, every day but one? He runs over, in his mind, with a misgiving as to their insufficiency, the reasons of his visit. For the first he had had an excellent excuse. Surely it would have been barbarous not to have imparted to the anxiously-watching pair the good news that the object of their mysterious terror has really and authentically gone! On the second day it seemed quite worth while to take the walk, in order to tell them that he

has accidentally learned the clergyman's destination to be Venice, and his intention to return *viâ* Milan and the St. Gothard. On the third day, being as near to them as San Annunziata, it had seemed unfriendly not to inquire after Mrs. Le Marchant's neuralgia. On the fourth—— He is pulled up short in his reminiscences. Why had he gone on the fourth day? He can give no answer to the question, and slides off from it to another. Which was the fourth day? Was it—yes, it was the one on which the wind blew as coldly east as it might have done across Salisbury Plain's naked expanse, and he had found Elizabeth sitting on a milking-stool shivering over a poor little fire of green wood, and blowing it with a pair of bellows. He had helped her to blow, and between them they had blown the fire entirely away, as often happens in the case of unskilled handlers of bellows, and Elizabeth had laughed till she cried.

And meanwhile, how many times has he been within the portals of the Anglo-

Américain? With all his arithmetic he cannot make it more than twice. This neglect of his betrothed, however, is not of quite so monstrous a cast as at the first blush it may appear. It is she herself who, true to her life-long principle of shielding him from all disagreeable experiences, has forbidden him her door. He can aid her neither to bandage her father's swollen foot in the severe gout-fit under which he is groaning, nor to allay Sybilla's mysterious sufferings, which always display a marked increase in acuteness whenever any other member of the family shows a disposition to set up claims as an invalid. Cecilia, indeed, is ready enough to give her help in nursing her father, but she has on former occasions shown such an unhappy aptitude for tumbling over his swathed and extended leg, and upsetting his physic all over him, that she is received with such objurgations as his cloth will permit, so often as she shows her short nose within his sick-room. Only twice in a whole week. Can Amelia have wished to be taken quite so literally

when she had bidden him stay away? There is only one answer possible to this question, and he shows his consciousness of it by at once raising himself out of the chair in which he is sunk, and turning his steps hastily towards her.

It is morning. The east wind is clean gone, and the streets are full of the scent of the innumerable lilies of the valley, of which everybody's hands are full. He stops a minute and buys a great sheaf for a miraculously small sum, from one of the unnumbered sellers. It shall make his peace for him, if indeed it needs making, which it has never done yet. He almost smiles at the absurdity of the suggestion. He finds Cecilia alone in the sitting-room, Cecilia sitting by the window reading the *Queen*. Upon her large pink face there is a puzzled expression, which is perhaps to be accounted for by the fact that the portion of the journal which she is perusing is that entitled "Etiquette," and under it are the answers to last week's questions, upon nice points of social law, which, if you do not

happen to have read the questions, have undoubtedly an enigmatical air, as in the following instances: "Your husband takes the Baronet's daughter, and you follow with the Prince."—"We do not understand your question—babies never dine out," etc.

Upon Jim's entrance Cecilia lays down her paper, and at once offers to go in search of her sister, with whom she shortly returns. He had been quite right. There is no peace to make. Amelia greets him with her usual patient and perfectly unrancorous smile, but his second glance at her tells him that she is looking old and fagged. It is only in very early youth that vigils and worries and self-denials do not write their names upon the skin.

"How—how pale you are!" he says. If he had given utterance to the word that hovered on his lips, he would have cried, "how yellow!"

"It would be very odd if she did not," says Cecilia with a shrug, looking up from her "Etiquette," to which she has returned;

“she has sat up three nights with father, and last evening Sybilla bid us all good-bye. You know she never can bear anybody else to be ill, and when father has the gout she bids us all good-bye—and Amelia is always taken in and sheds torrents of tears—do not you, Amelia?”

Amelia has subsided rather wearily into a chair. “She really thinks that she is dying,” says she apologetically — “and who knows? some day perhaps it may come true.”

“Not it,” rejoins her sister, with an exasperated sniff, “she will see us all out—will not she, Jim?”

“I have not the remotest doubt of it,” replies he heartily; and then his conscience-struck eyes revert to his betrothed’s wan face, all the plainer for its wanness. “No sleep, no fresh air,” in an injured tone, checking off the items on his fingers.

“But I have had fresh air,” smiling at him with pale affection; “one day Mrs. Byng took me out for a drive. Mrs. Byng has been very kind to me.”

She does not lay the faintest invidious accent on the name, as if contrasting it with another whose owner had been so far less kind; it is his own guilty heart that supplies the emphasis. His only resource is an anger which—so curiously perverse is human nature—is not even feigned.

“You can go out driving with Mrs. Byng then, though you could not spare time to come out with me,” he says in a surly voice.

She does not defend herself, but her lower lip trembles.

“Come out with me now,” he cries, remorse giving a harshness even to the tone of the sincerely-meant invitation. “You look like a geranium in a cellar; it is a divine day, a day to make the old feel young, and the young immortal; come out and stay out with me all day. I will take you wherever you like. I will——”

The genuine eagerness of his proposal has tinged her sickly-coloured cheek with

a healthier hue for the moment, but she shakes her head.

“I could not leave father this morning ; he will not take his medicine from anyone else, and he likes me to sit with him while he eats his arrowroot.”

The only sign of approval of this instance of filial piety given by Jim is that he rises and begins to stamp irritably about the room.

“He is really not at all exacting,” continues Amelia in anxious deprecation ; “he was quite pleased just now when I told him that Mrs. Byng was going to take me to a party at the Villa Schiavone this afternoon. He said——”

“Mrs. Byng ! Mrs. Byng again !”

This is not what Mr. Wilson said, but is the expression of the unjust wrath which Burgoyne, feeling it much pleasanter to be angry with someone else than himself, is artificially and not unsuccessfully fostering. Again Amelia’s lip quivers.

“I thought,” she says gently, “if—if you have no other engagement this afternoon ; if—if you are free——”

Nothing can be milder than the form which this suggestion takes, and yet there is something in its shape that provokes him.

“Free!” he interrupts tartly, “of course I am free! Have I a gouty father and a hysteric sister? Why should not I be free?”

“I am very glad to hear it,” rejoins she—the light that his first proposal to take her out had brought into her face growing brighter and more established—“because in that case there is nothing to prevent your meeting us at the villa, and——”

“And seeing you and Mrs. Byng walking about with your arms round each other’s necks, like a couple of schoolgirls,” cries he, with a sort of spurious grumpiness.

“I can’t think why you should object to Amelia walking about with her arm round *Mrs. Byng’s* neck,” says Cecilia, whose attention to her “*Etiquette*” is apparently not so absorbing but that she has some to

spare for the conversation going on in her neighbourhood.

They all laugh a little ; and harmony being restored, and Jim graciously vouchsafing to forgive Amelia for having ignored her for a sennight, she returns to her patient, and he to his hotel, where he is at once, contrary to his wish, pounced upon by Byng.

For some reason, which he would be puzzled to explain to himself, he has for the last week rather avoided his friend's company—a task rendered easier by the disposition manifested by the young man's mother to monopolize him, a disposition to which Burgoyne has felt no inclination to run counter. It is without enthusiasm that he receives Byng's expressions of pleasure in their accidental meeting.

“ I have been searching for you, high and low.”

“ Have you ?”

“ Where have you been ?”

“ I have been to the *Anglo-Américain* ”
—with a flash of inward self-congratulation

at this query having been put to-day, instead of yesterday, or the day before. The other looks disappointed.

“To the Anglo-Américain? I thought—I hoped; have you—seen *them* lately?”

Burgoyne has ceased to feign lack of understanding to whom the personal pronoun refers, and he answers with as much carelessness as at a moment's notice he can put on: “Why, yes, I have, once or twice.”

“Do they—do not they think it strange of me not to have been near them all this time?”

“They may do”—drily.

“They did not say so?”

“They did not; perhaps”—sarcastically—“the subject was too acutely painful for them to allude to.”

Frequently as he has exposed himself to them, his Mentor's sneers never fail to send the crimson racing into Byng's face, and it finds its way there now. It does not, however, prevent his proceeding, after a confused moment or two, with his anxious catechism.

“She—she has not referred to the subject?”

“What subject?”

“To—to me?”

“She has never mentioned your name. Stay”—his veracity winning a reluctant victory over his ill-nature—“one day she said that you were sunshiny, and that she liked sunshine.”

As he speaks he looks down at his boots, too unaffectedly annoyed at the justification of Elizabeth's epithet which its retailing has worked on Byng's countenance, to be able to contemplate him with any decent patience. But there is enough evidence in the boy's voice of the effect wrought upon him by Miss Le Marchant's adjective to make his comrade repent very heartily of having repeated it.

“I should have been over,” says Byng in a low eager way, “every day, every hour, as often as they would have received me, only that I could not leave my mother; and she—she has taken them *en grippe*!”

“*En grippe*? Your mother?” repeats

Jim, too honestly and disagreeably startled by this piece of news to be able any longer to maintain his ironical manner; "why?"

The other shrugs his shoulders dispiritedly.

"I have not an idea; it cannot be because they did not seem to wish to be introduced to her at the Accademia the other day; she is quite incapable of such pettiness, and she admired HER so tremendously at first, did not she? You heard her; but since then she has taken it into her head that there is something—I cannot bear even to say it"—dashing his hat and gloves vehemently upon the table—"something *louche*, as she calls it, about her. Mother thinks that she—she—she"—sinking his voice to an indistinct half-whisper—"has—has gone off the rails some time or other. Can you conceive?"—raising his tone again to one of the acutest pain and indignation—"that anyone—any human being could look in her face and harbour such a notion for a single instant?"

He stares with eyes ablaze with wrathful pity at his friend's face, expecting an answering outbreak to his own ; but none such comes. Burgoyne only says, in a not much more assured key than that which the young man had employed :

“ How—how can such an idea have got into your mother's head ? ”

“ I do not know, but it is there ; and what I wanted you, what I have been searching everywhere for you for, is to ask you to—to set her right, at once, without any delay. It is unbearable that she should go on thinking such things, and nothing could be easier for you, who know them so well, who know all about them ! ”

Burgoyne is at first too much stupefied by this appeal, and by the impossibility of answering it in a satisfactory manner, to make any response at all ; but at length :

“ Know all about them ? ” he says, in a voice whose surface impatience hides a much profounder feeling. “ Who dares ever say that he knows all about any other living soul ? How many times must I tell

you that, until we met at Genoa, I had not set eyes on Miss Le Marchant for ten good years?"

At the tone of this speech, so widely different from the eager acceptance of the suggested task which he had expected, Byng's face takes on a crestfallen, almost frightened look.

"But when you knew them," he says. "in Devonshire, they—they were all right then, were not they? they were well thought of?—there was nothing against them?"

"Good Heavens—no!" replies Jim heartily, thankful that the appeal is now so worded as to enable him to give a warm testimony in favour of his poor friends. "There was not a family in all the neighbourhood that stood so high. Everybody loved them; everybody had a good word for them."

Byng's countenance clears a little.

"And there is no reason—you have no reason for supposing anything different now?"

Jim stirs uneasily in his chair. Can he truthfully give the same convinced affirmative to this question as to the last? It is a second or two before he answers it at all.

“The facts of life are enough for me; I do not trouble myself with its suppositions.”

He gets up and walks towards the door as he speaks, resolved to bring to an end this to him intolerable catechism.

“But you must have an opinion—you must think,” cries the other’s voice, persistently pursuing him. He turns at bay, with the door-handle in his hand, his eyes lightening.

“I asked her permission to bring Amelia to see her,” he says, in a low moved voice; “if I had thought as ill of her as your mother does, do you think I should have done that?”



CHAPTER XIX.

CAMILLE.—“Que me conseillerez-vous de faire le jour où je verrais que vous ne m'aimez plus?”

THERE is no greater fiction than that for time to go quickly implies that it must needs go pleasantly. Jim has seldom spent a more disagreeable period than the hours which follow his conversation with Byng, and which he passes in his own bedroom, with his elbows on the window-ledge, looking blankly out at the Piazza, and at the great “Bride” of Arnolpho’s planning, the church of Santa Maria Novella. And yet, when the city clocks, which have chimed unnoticed by him several times, at length convey to his inattentive ear what the hour is, he starts

up, shocked and confused at its lateness. He had meant to have reached the Villa Schiavone in time to receive Amelia, and now she must have long preceded him, and be attributing his tardiness to some fresh neglect and indifference. In five minutes he has rearranged his dress, and jumped into a fiacre. Through the Porta Romana, and up between the straight row of still and inky cypresses, up and up to where the villa door, promising so little and performing so much, opens as so many do, straight upon the road.

The day has changed its ravishing blue gaiety for a pensive cloudy gloom, and the guests at the villa are walking about without any sunshades. They are numerous, though few indeed in comparison of the Banksia roses on the laden wall, over which, too, a great wistaria—put in, as the host with a just pride relates, only last year—is hanging and flinging its lilac abundance. And seen above its clusters, and above the wall, what a view from this raised terrace! Jim is really in a hurry to

find Amelia, and yet he cannot choose but stop to look at it—from Galileo's tower on the right, to where, far down the plain of the Arno, Carrara loses itself in mist. It is all dark at first, sullen, purple-gray, without variation or stir—city, Duomo, Arno, Fiesole, and all her chain of sister-hills—one universal frown over every slope and jag, over street and spire, over Campanile with its marbles, and Santa Croce with its dead. But now, as it draws on towards sun-setting, in the western sky there comes a beginning of light, a faint pale tint at first, but quickly broadening across the firmament, while the whole huge cloud canopy is drawn aside like a curtain, and, as a great bright eye from under bent brows, the lowering sun sends arrows of radiance over plain, and river, and city. All of a sudden there is a vertical rain of dazzling white rays on the plain, and the olive shadows, merged all the afternoon in the universal gray, fall long and soft upon the blinding green of the young corn. He has forgotten Amelia. Oh, that that other,

that creature herself made out of sun-rays and sweet rain-drops, were beside him, her pulses beating, as they so surely would, to his tune, her whole tender being quivering with delicate joy at this heavenly spectacle.

Someone touches him on the shoulder, and he starts violently. Has the intensity of his invocation called her spirit out of her light body, and is she indeed beside him?

“What a bad conscience you must have! Did you think that I was a bailiff?” cries Mrs. Byng, laughing.

“Where is Amelia?” he asks, rather curtly, the memory of Byng’s communication about his mother being too fresh in his mind to make it possible for him to answer her in her own rallying key. “What have you done with Amelia?”

“What a ‘Stand - and - deliver’ tone!” says she, laughing still, but looking not unnaturally surprised. “Well, where is she?” glancing round. “She was here five minutes ago with Willy. Poor Amelia!” lowering her voice to a more confidential key. “I am so glad you have

come at last ; she is patience personified. I must congratulate you upon the excellent training into which you have got her, but I think that she was beginning to look a little anxious."

" And *I* think that you have been giving the reins to your imagination, as usual," replies he, walking off in a huff.

There is another delightful garden at the back of the villa, and there, having failed to find her in the first, he now with growing irritation at her for not being more immediately conspicuous, seeks Amelia. It is a sheltered leisurely paradise, where white rose-trees, with millions of bursting buds, are careering over the walls in leafy luxuriance, where double wallflowers — bloody warriors, one should call them, if one could connect any warlike idea with this Eden of scented peace—stocks in fragrant row are flowering as we Britons never see them flower in our chary isle, save in the plates of a Gardeners' Chronicle. But among them he finds no trace of his homely English blossom. He finds,

indeed, him who had been named as her late companion, Byng ; but it is not with Amelia, but with one of the pretty young daughters of the house that he is pacing the straight walk in lively dialogue. Jim accosts him formally :

“ I understood that Miss Wilson was with you? Do you happen to know where she is?”

Byng stops short in his leisurely pacing.

“ Why, where is she?” he says, looking round, as his mother had done, but with a more guilty air. “ She was here five minutes ago. Where can she have disappeared to?”

It is but too obvious that in greeting and being greeted by their numerous acquaintances, both poor Amelia's chaperon and that chaperon's son have completely forgotten her existence. Always nervously afraid of being burdensome, Jim feels convinced from what he knows of her character that she is going about in unobtrusive forlornness, the extreme smallness of her Florentine acquaintances making it un-

likely that she has found anyone to supply the place of the friends who have become so entirely oblivious of her. The conviction, pricking his conscience as he hastens contritely away from the vainly-repentant Byng, lends speed and keenness to his search. But thorough and earnest as it is, it is for some time quite unsuccessful. She makes one of no group, she loiters under no Banksia rose-bower, she is no gazer from the terrace at gold-misted valley or aureoled town, she is to be found neither in hidden nook nor evident path. She is not beneath the loggia, she is nowhere out-of-doors. She must then, in her loneliness, have taken refuge in the house. He finds himself in a long, noble room, with a frescoed ceiling, a room full of signs of recent habitation and recent tea, but which has apparently been deserted for the sunset splendours on the terrace. He can see no single occupant. He walks slowly down it to assure himself of the fact of its entire emptiness.

By a singular and unaccountable freak

of the builders, the windows are set so high in the wall that each has had to have a little raised dais erected before it to enable the inmates to look comfortably out. Upon each small platform stands a chair or two, and low over them the curtains sweep. As he passes one recess, he notices that the drapery is stirring a little, and examining more closely, sees the tail of a well-known gown—of that gown which has met with his nearest approach to approval among Amelia's rather scanty stock—peeping from beneath the stiff rich folds of the old Italian brocade. It is the work of a second to sweep the latter aside, and discover his poor *fiancée* all alone, and crouching desolately in a low arm-chair. There is something so unlike her in the attitude, something so different from her usual uncomplaining, unpretending fortitude, something so disproportioned to the cause—his own careless but not criminal delay, as he supposes—in the despair evidenced by her whole pose, that he feels at once terrified and angry. In a second he,

too, has stepped up on to the little platform beside her.

“Amelia!” he cries. “Amelia! What are you doing up here? With whom are you playing hide-and-seek?”

Her words and her smiles are apt to be prompt enough, Heaven knows, to spring out, answering his least hint; but now she neither speaks nor moves a muscle of her face. She scarcely starts at all at his sudden apparition and address, and no light comes across her features — those features which, now that he looks at them more closely, he sees to be set in a much more pinched pallor than even three watching nights and a week of airless worry can account for.

“Are you ill?”

“No; I am not ill.”

The sting of irritation which, mixed with genuine alarm, had besieged Jim’s mind on his first realizing her crouched and unnatural attitude, now entirely supersedes any other feeling. Is the accidental delay of half an hour, an hour, say even an

hour and a half, enough to justify such a parade of anguish as this ?

“ Is it possible,” he inquires, in a tone of cold displeasure, “ that I am to attribute this—this state of things—to my being accidentally late ? It was a mere accident : it is not like you to make a scene. I do not recognise you ; I am very sorry that I was late, and that I have made you angry.”

The chill reproach of his words seems to rouse her to a state more akin to her natural one, to the humble and unexacting one which is habitual to her.

“ Angry !” she repeats : “ angry with you for being late ? Oh, you are quite mistaken ! In all these years how often have I been angry with you ?”

There is such a meek upbraiding in her tone that his ill-humour gives way to a vague apprehension.

“ Then what is it ?” he cries brusquely ; “ what is it all about ? I think I have a right to ask you that ; since I saw you last something must have happened

to you to produce this extraordinary change."

She heaves a long dragging sigh.

"Something has happened to me ; yes, something has happened !"

"But what—what kind of a something ? I have a right to know—I insist upon knowing ; tell me !"

He has grasped both her hands, whose unnatural coldness he feels even through her rather ill-fitting gloves. So strange and mean a thing is human nature that even at this moment it flashes across him, with a sense of annoyance, what bad gloves Amelia always wears. However, he is not troubled with them long, for she takes them and her cold hands quietly back.

"I will tell you, there is no question of insisting. I should have told you anyhow ; but not *here*"—glancing nervously round the dropped curtains—"not now !"

"Why not here ? Why not now ?"

Her face quivers.

"I could not," she says piteously. "I

do not quite know how I shall get through telling it ; it must be somewhere—somewhere where it will not matter if I do break down !”

He stares at her in an unfeigned bewilderment, again slightly streaked with wrath.

“ Have you gone mad, Amelia ? or are you taking a leaf out of Sybilla’s book ? If you do not clear up this extraordinary mystification at once, I shall be compelled to believe either the one or the other.”

Again her face contracts with pain.

“ Oh, if it were only a mystification !” she says, with a low cry. “ I cannot tell you here ; it is physically impossible to me. But do not be afraid ”—with an accent of bitterness, which he is quite at a loss to account for—“ you shall not have long to wait ; I will tell you, without fail, to-morrow ; to-morrow morning, if you like. Come as early as you please, I shall be ready to tell you ; and now would you mind leaving me ? I want to have a few moments to myself before I see anybody—

before I see Mrs. Byng ; will you please leave me ?”

It is so apparent that she is in deadly earnest, and resolute to have her request complied with, that he can do nothing but step dizzily down off the little daïs, feeling as if the world were turning round with him.

A quarter of an hour later he sees her leaving the party with Mrs. Byng, looking as simple, as collected, and not very perceptibly paler than usual.





CHAPTER XX.

THERE is always something in the nature of a mountain in a night that is interposed between us and either any promised pleasure or any threatened pain. In the case of pleasure, we are naturally in a hurry to scale it, in order to see how full of sunshine and flowers is the happy valley on the other side ; and in the case of pain, we are all scarcely less eager to ascertain how deep is the abyss, how choking the swamp, how angry the waves that wait us beyond the dusty hill.

Burgoyne has no expectation of finding anything agreeable on the further slope of his mountain, and yet the time seems long

to him, till he has climbed its crest, and slidden down its other side. Early and splendid as is the new light that takes possession of him and his shutterless bedroom, he upbraids it as a laggard ; and the hours that pace by till the one appointed for the explanation of yesterday's mystery seem to him to hobble on crutches. What can Amelia have to say to him that needs such a pomp of preparation ? What can have turned Amelia into a Tragedy Queen ? What miracle can have made her take the imperative mood ? For it was the imperative mood unquestionably which, contrary to all precedent, she had made use of when she had commanded him, most gently it is true, since, being by her nature gentle, she can do nothing ungently, to leave her. He absolutely laughs at the topsy-turviness of the idea. What can she have to say that requires so carefully selected a spot to say it in ?—a spot where “it does not matter if she does break down.” What, in Heaven's name, can she be going to say that inspires her with such

a cold-blooded intention beforehand of breaking down?

Jim's state of mind is something that of the Baron's in "*On ne badine pas avec l'amour*," on hearing that his daughter's governess had been turning somersaults in a field of luzerne. "*Non, en vérité, non, mon ami, je n'y comprends absolument rien. Tout cela me paraît une conduite désordonnée, il est vrai, mais sans motif comme sans excuse.*" If she were any other woman, he should ascribe her behaviour to some tiresome but passing tantrum, evoked by his delay in appearing? But in the past eight years how many hundred times has he kept her waiting? and has she ever failed to meet him with the same meek good-humour that has not had even a tinge of reproachful forgiveness in it. As she herself had said, "*In all these years how often have I been angry with you?*" He has been angry with her times out of mind, angry with her on a thousand unjust and unkind counts; angry with her for her slowness, her bad complexion, her

want of a sense of humour ; for a hundred things that she cannot help, that she would have altered—oh, how gladly—if she could ! But how often has she been angry with him ? In vain he searches his memory, hoping to overtake some instance of ill-humour, or even pettishness, that may make the balance between them hang a little more equal. But in vain. She has never been angry with him. And even now neither her face nor her manner—whatever else of strange and unparalleled they may have conveyed—have conveyed the idea of anger.

But if not anger, what then can be the cause that has produced a change so startling in one so little given to impulsive action or eccentricities of emotion ? Can she have heard anything about him ? anything to his discredit ? He searches his conscience, but whether it be that that organ is not a particularly sensitive one, or that it really has no damaging facts to give up, it is silent, or almost so. He has perhaps been rather slack in his attendance

upon her of late, but at her own bidding. At his visits to the Le Marchants' no one could take exception, dictated as they so obviously have been by philanthropy, and his conversations with Elizabeth—how few and scant! his heart heaves a rebellious sigh at their paucity—might be proclaimed without excision at the market cross. Our thoughts are our own, and are, moreover, so safely padlocked in our minds that he does not think it worth while to inquire whether, if his future wife could have looked in and seen the restive fancies capering, saddleless and bridleless, there, she might have been justified in assuming a crouching attitude and a sorrowfully commanding manner.

He is as far as ever from solving the problem, when—for once in his life before his time at the rendezvous—he presents himself at the familiar door. It is opened to him by Amelia herself. She has often done it before, seeming to know by instinct his ring from that of any other person, but to-day the familiar action disconcerts him.

He had expected to be received with a formality and pomp of woe such as yesterday had seemed to threaten ; and here is Amelia looking exactly like her ordinary self, except that she is perhaps rather more carefully dressed than usual ; but that may be due to the fact of her having, for the first time, assumed the fresh calico gown, which the high summer of the Italian April morning seems to justify. Whether it be due to the calico gown or not, there is an indisputable air of gala about her, and she is smiling. A revulsion of feeling comes over the man, to whom her tragic semi-swooning airs had given a wakeful night. It was a tantrum after all, then ; a storm in a teacup. And now her common sense has come to the rescue, and she has seen the folly of quarrelling with her bread and butter. These reflections naturally do not translate themselves into responsive smiles on his face, but she does not seem to notice his dour looks.

“ I have a proposal to make to you,” she says, still smiling. “ Father is so well this

morning, quite easy, and he has been wheeled into the sitting-room to see Sybilla. She has been very good about him this time, and quite believes that he has been really bad."

"How good of her!" comments Jim grimly; "it would be so easy and so amusing to play at having a swollen toe, would not it?"

"And so," continues Miss Wilson, wisely ignoring his fleer at her sister, "I am perfectly free, and I want you to take me somewhere, some little drive or expedition; you see," with a conciliatory glance at her own modest finery, "I counted upon your saying 'yes;' I dressed so as not to keep you waiting."

Every word of this sentence confirms Burgoyne in the idea implanted by her first address. This is her *amende*, and she is quite right to make it. But she would have been more right still if her conduct had not rendered it necessary.

Amelia is not the type of woman who through life will gain much by pouts.

Perhaps, by-and-by, very kindly and delicately, he may obliquely hint this to her. But all that he says aloud is the rather stiff acquiescence conveyed in the words :

“By all means. I am quite at your service.”

“And now where shall we go?” continues Amelia, shutting the door behind her and beginning to cross the hotel courtyard at his side ; “that is the next thing—not to any gallery or church, I think, if you do not mind ; I say such stupid things about Art, and the more I try, the stupider they are ; let us go somewhere into the country—I can understand the country. I am not afraid of saying stupid things about it.”

Into Burgoyne’s mind comes the odious thought that he would not put it past his betrothed to say stupid things even about the Tuscan landscape, but he only awaits her decision in a respectful silence while helping her into a fiacre.

“It would be a sin to be under any roof to-day but this one,” she says, looking up

to the immeasurable azure bridge above her head; would you mind—could you spare time to go to Fiesole?"

His only answer is to repeat the word Fiesole to the driver, who, with the inevitable tiny poodle-shaven dog beside him, is awaiting the order as to his destination. It is but a little way to Fiesole, as we all know, but yet, as the slow hired vehicle crawls up the steep ascent, with the driver walking alongside, or even lagging behind, there would be time and opportunity to say a good deal. But Amelia says next to nothing. Perhaps the heat makes her sleepy, for it is so hot, so hot between the garden walls, where the rose hedges are beginning to show a pale flush of plenteous pink among their multitude of green buds. Young, indeed, just born as the roses are, the highway dust has already powdered them with its ash-toned white. He does not know it at the time, but those dust-filmed rosebuds have found a home in his memory from which no after-sights, however numerous, will

dislodge them. They have reached the village, and left their carriage, and begun, silently still, to ascend the steep lane up which the feet of most of Europe and America have in turn climbed to see the famous view that rewards the little effort. Past the cottages, whose inmates, tranquilly sitting in their doorways, or leaning idly against their doorposts, have probably seen all that is illustrious, notorious, history-making of the day, pass pantingly. Is there a prime minister, a princess, a poet, a prima donna, of the time, that has not toiled up the steep path to the welcome rest of the bench on the high plateau, on the hill-side? Jim and Amelia are certainly not likely to figure in the annals of their time, but the peasants look at them with as much or as little interest as if they were. An immortal, unless his immortality is printed on his back in letters as large as those that announce Colman's mustard to the world, has, to the vulgar, very much the air of one of themselves.

Our friends have reached the haven of

the stone seat, and, thanks to the earliness of the hour, have it all to themselves, save for a trio of sunburnt women of the people, with handkerchiefs tied over their tanned heads, who tease them to buy straw hand-screens. And when they have bought a couple, and made it kindly but distinctly evident that no amount of worrying will induce them to buy any more, even these leave them in peace and descend the hill again, in search of newer victims. They are alone under the sky's warm azure. Beneath their eyes spreads one of those nobly lovely spectacles that Italy and spring, hand in hand, alone can offer. To some, indeed, it may seem that the prospect from the Bellosguardo side of the valley is even more beautiful, since Fiesole, sitting so high as she does, dwarfs the opposite hills, and makes the looker lose their wavy line. They seem flat in comparison, the plain appears wider, the beloved city more distant, and does not show the same exquisite distinctness of separate tower and spire and palace. But yet such

comparison is mere carping. Who can wish for a sight more divinely suave and fair than this from the bench above Fiesole? Not a breath of smoke dares to hang about the glorious old town, dimming its lustre, and between them and it what a spread of manifold colour, of more "mingled hue" than the rainbow's "purpled scarf doth show!" The moony-tinted olives, twilight and ghostly, even in the dazzling radiance of this superb morning hour, with the blinding green of the young corn about their gray feet, the cypress taper-flames, the gay white houses, terrace gardened, and above all, the vast smile of the Tuscan heaven.

At first Amelia's muteness seems natural and grateful to Jim, as the outcome of the awe and hush that exceeding beauty breathes on the human heart, but by-and-by, as it is prolonged beyond the limits that seem to him fit or agreeable, it begins to get on his nerves. After having so genuinely and wantonly alarmed him, has she brought him here, without

any expressions of regret or remorse, simply to steep herself in a silent luxury of selfish enjoyment? After brooding resentfully on this idea for a considerable time, he translates it into speech.

“I thought that you had something to say to me?”

It seems as if her soul had gone out into the sun and April-painted champaign country, and that it is only with an effort and a sigh that she fetches it home again :

“So I have.”

“And how much longer am I to wait for it?”

There is no indication of any capacity for patience in his tone.

She brings her look back from the shining morning city, and fixes it wistfully upon him.

“Are you in such a hurry to hear?”

The pathetic streak in her voice, instead of conciliating, chafes him. What is the sense of this paraphernalia of preliminaries? Why not come to the point at once? if

indeed there is a point—a fact of which he begins to entertain grave doubts.

“I do not know what you call hurry,” he replies drily, “I have been awaiting this mystic utterance for sixteen or seventeen hours.”

Her sallow cheek takes on a pinky tinge of mortification at his accent.

“You are quite right,” she answers quickly; “I have no business to keep you waiting. I meant to tell you as soon as we got here; I asked you to bring me here on purpose, only——”

“You told me that you must make the communication at some place where it would not matter if you did break down,” says he, rather harshly helping her memory; “you must allow that that was not an encouraging exordium. Do you look upon this”—glancing ironically round—“as a particularly suitable place for breaking down?”

Again that pain-evidencing wave of colour flows into her face. There is such an unloving mockery in his displeased voice.

“I shall not break down,” she replies, forcing herself to speak with quiet composure; “you need not be afraid that I shall. I know that yesterday I was foolish enough to say the very words you quote, but I was not quite myself then; I did not quite know what I was saying; I had only just heard it.”

“*It?* What *it?* Is this a new riddle? For Heaven’s sake let us hear the answer to the first before we embark on any fresh one!”

“It is no riddle,” replies she, her low patient tones contrasting with his exasperated ones, “nothing could be plainer; it was only that I happened to overhear something rather—rather painful—something that was not intended for me.”

His angry cheek blanches as his thought flies arrow-quick to the one subject of his perennial apprehension. Someone has been poisoning her ear with cowardly libels, or yet more dreadful truths about Elizabeth Le Marchant. For a moment or two his tongue cleaves to the roof of his mouth,

then he says in a tone which he uselessly tries to make one of calm contempt alone :

“ If you had lived longer in Florence, you would know how much importance to attach to its tittle-tattle and *cancans*.”

She shakes her head with a sorrowful obstinacy.

“ This was no tittle-tattle—no *cancan*.”

Her answer seems but to confirm him in this first horrible suspicion.

“ It is astonishing,” he says, in a strangled voice, “ how ready even the best women are to believe evil ; what—what evidence have you of the truth of—of these precious stories ?”

“ What evidence ?” she repeats, fastening her sad eyes upon him—“ the evidence of my own heart. I realize now that I have known it all along.”

Read by the light of his fears, this response is so enigmatic that it dawns upon him with a flash of inexpressible solace that perhaps he may be on the wrong track after all. His ideas are precipitated

into such a state of confusion by this blessed possibility that he can only echo in a stupefied tone :

“ Have known what all along ?”

She has turned round on the stone bench upon which they have hitherto been sitting side by side, and, as he in the eagerness of his listening has done the same thing, they are now opposite to one another, and he feels as well as sees her hungry eyes devouring his face.

“ That you are sick of me,” she answers, in a heart-wrung whisper, “ sick to death of me—that was what she said.”

It is impossible to deny that Burgoyne’s first impulse is one of relief. He has been mistaken, then. Elizabeth’s secret is in the same state of precarious safety as her enemy’s departure from Florence had left it in. His second impulse—our second impulses are mostly our best ones, equally free from the headlongness of our first, and the cold worldly wisdom of our third—is one of genuine indignation, concern, and amazement.

“What who said?”

“Mrs. Byng.”

His stupefaction deepens.

“*Mrs. Byng*—Mrs. Byng told you that I was sick of you? Sick to death of you?”

“Oh, no,” she cries, even her emotion giving way to her eagerness to correct this misapprehension, “she did not tell *me* so! How could you imagine such a thing? She is far, far too kind-hearted; she would not hurt a fly intentionally, and would be exceedingly pained if she thought I had overheard her.”

He shrugs his shoulders despairingly.

“*Je m’y perds !* She told you, and she did not tell you; you heard, and you did not hear.”

“I am telling it very stupidly, I know,” she says apologetically, “very confusedly; and of course I can’t expect you to understand by instinct how it was.” She sighs profoundly, and then goes on quickly, and no longer looking at him. “You know she took me to the party, but when we

reached the villa, I found that she knew so many people, and I so few that I should only be a burden to her if I kept continually by her side, and as I was rather tired—you know that I had not been in bed for two or three nights—I thought I would go into the house and rest, so as to be quite fresh by the time you came. I fancied it was not unlikely you might be a little late.”

His conscience, at the unintentional reproach of this patient supposition, reminds him of its existence by a sharp prick. How many times has her poor vanity suffered the bruise of being long first at the rendezvous?

“ I discovered that chair by the window under the curtain, the one where you found me.”

“ Well ?”

“ It was so quiet there, as everybody was in the garden, that I suppose I fell asleep ; at least I remember nothing more until suddenly I heard Mrs. Byng’s voice saying——”

“Saying what?”

“Her son was with her—he had brought her in to have some tea; it was to him that she was speaking; she was asking him about me, where I was? where he had left me? whether he had seen me lately? And then she said, ‘Poor Amelia, Jim really does neglect her shamefully; and yet one cannot help being sorry for him, too; it was such child-stealing in the first instance, and he is evidently dead-sick of her! It is so astonishing that she does not see it!’”

There is something almost terrible in the calm distinctness with which Amelia repeats the sentences that had laid the card-house of her happiness in the dust. Certainly she keeps her promise to him to the letter; she gives no lightest sign of breaking down. There is not a tear in her eye, not a quiver in her voice. After a moment's pause, she continues:

“And then he, Mr. Byng, answered, ‘Poor soul, it—it is odd! She must have the hide of a hippopotamus.’”

Amelia has finished her narrative, repeating the young man's galling comment, with the same composure as his mother's humiliatingly compassionate ones ; and for a space her sole auditor is absolutely incapable of making any criticism upon it. He is forbidden, if he had wished it, to offer her even the mute amends of a dumb endearment, by the reappearance on the scene of a couple of the sun-scorched peasant torments with their straw hand-screens. It is not likely that those so lately bought should have worn out already ; but yet they renew their importunities with such a determined obstinacy, as if they knew this to be the case ; and it is not until they are lightened of two more, that they consent once again to retire, leaving the warm bright plateau to the lovers—if indeed they can be called such.



CHAPTER XXI.

“True, be it said, whatever man it said,
That love with gall and honey doth abound ;
But if the one be with the other way’d,
For every dram of honey therein found
A pound of gall doth over it redound.”

“SHE was perfectly right,” says Amelia, still speaking quite quietly ; “it is astonishing that I should not have seen it ; and it *was* child-stealing ; you were barely twenty-one, and I—I was not very young for a woman even then—I was twenty-three. I ought to have known better.”

For once in his life Burgoyne is absolutely bereft of speech. It is always a difficult matter to rebut a charge of being dead-sick of a woman without conveying

an insult in the very denial ; and when there lies a horrid substratum of truth under the exaggeration of the accusation, the difficulty becomes an impossibility.

“However, it might have been much worse,” continues Miss Wilson ; “just think if I had overheard it only after I had married you, when I knew that there was nothing but death that could rid you of me. I thank God I have heard it in time.”

His throat is still too dry for him to speak ; but he stretches out his arm to encircle her in a mute protest at that thanksgiving over her own shipwreck ; but, for the first time in her life, she eludes his caress.

“Child-stealing,” she repeats, under her breath ; “and yet”—with a touching impulse of apology and deprecation—“you seemed old for your age ; you seemed so much in earnest ; I think you really were ;”—a wistful pause—“and afterwards, though of course I could not help seeing that I was not to you what you were to

me, yet I thought—I hoped that if I waited—if I was patient—if no one else—no one more worthy of you came between us”—another and still wistfuller delay in her halting speech—“you might grow a little fond of me, out of long habit ; I never expected you to be more than a little fond of me !”

He has entirely hidden his face in his two hands, so that she is without that index to guide her as to the effect produced by her words, and he continues completely silent. Whether, even after her rude awakening, she still, deep in her heart, cherishes some pale hope of a denial, an explaining away of the reported utterances, who shall say ? It is with a half-choked sigh that she goes on :

“ But you could not ; I am not so unjust as not to know that you tried your best. Poor fellow ! it must have been uphill work for you ”—with a first touch of bitterness—“ *labouring* to love me, for eight years ; is it any wonder that you failed ? and I was so thick-skinned I did not see

it—the '*hide of a hippopotamus*' indeed! There could not be a juster comparison; and now all I can do is to beg your pardon for having spoilt eight of your best years—*your best years*”—with slow iteration; “but come”—more lightly—“you have some very good ones left too; you are still quite young; for a man you are quite young; the harm I have done you is not irreparable; I think”—with an accent of reproach—“you might ease my mind by telling me that the harm I have done you is not irreparable!”

Thus appealed to, it is impossible for him any longer to maintain his attitude of disguise and concealment. His hands must needs be withdrawn from before his face; and, as he turns that face towards her, she perceives with astonishment, almost consternation, that there is an undoubted tear in each of his hard gray eyes.

“And what about the harm I have done to you?” he asks under his breath, as if having no confidence in his voice; “what

about the eight best years of *your* life?"

A look of affection, so high and tender and selfless, as to seem to remove her love out of the category of the mortal and the transitory, dawns and grows in her wan face.

"Do not fret about them," she answers soothingly, "they were—they always will have been—the eight best years of my life. They were full of good and pleasant things. Do not forget—I would not for worlds have you forget—I shall never forget myself—that they all came to me through you!"

At her words, most innocent as they are of any intention of producing such an effect, a hot flush of shame rises to his very forehead, as his memory presents to him the successive eras into which these eight good years had divided themselves: six months of headlong boyish passion; six months of cooling fever; and seven years of careless, intermittent, matter-of-course, half-tenderness.

“Through *me*?” he repeats, with an accent of the deepest self-abasement; “you do not mean to be ironical, dear; you were never such a thing in your life; you could not be if you tried; but if you knew what a *sweep* you make me feel when you say the sort of thing you have just said!—and so it is all to come to an end, is it? Good as these eight years have been, you have had enough of them? You do not want any more like them?”

She says neither yes nor no. He remains unanswered, unless the faint smile in her weary eyes and about her drooped mouth can count for a reply.

“And all because you have heard some fool say that I was tired of you?”

The tight smile spreads a little wider, and invades her pale cheeks.

“Worse than tired! *sick! sick to death!*”

She is looking straight before her, at the landscape simmering in the climbing sun, the divine landscape new and young

as it was before duomo and bell-tower sprang and towered heavenwards. Why should her gaze dwell any more upon him? She has renounced him, her eyes must fain renounce him too. As he hears her words, as he watches her patient profile, the sole suffering thing in the universal morning joy, a great revulsion of feeling, a great compassion mixed with as large a remorse pours in torrent over his heart. These emotions are so strong that they make him deceive even himself as to their nature. It seems to him as if scales had suddenly fallen from his eyes, showing him how profoundly he prizes the now departing good, telling him that life can neither ask nor give anything better than the undemanding, selfless, boundless love about to withdraw its shelter from him. His arm steals round her waist, and not once does it flash across his mind—as, to his shame be it spoken, it has often flashed before — what a long way it has to steal!

“Am I sick of you, Amelia?”

She makes no effort to release herself. It does him no harm that she should once more rest within his clasp. But she still looks straight before her at lucent Firenze and her olives, and says three times, accompanying each repetition of the word with a sorrowful little head-shake :

“ Yes ! *yes* ! YES ! ”

He will compel her to look at him, his own Amelia. Have not all her tender looks been his for eight long years ? He puts out his disengaged hand, and with it determinately turns her poor quivering face round so as to meet his gaze.

“ Am I sick of you, Amelia ? ”

In the emotion of the moment, it appears to him as if there were something almost ludicrously improbable and lying about that accusation, in which, when first brought against him, his guilty soul had admitted more than a grain of truth. Her faded eyes turn to his, like flowers to their sun ; the veracity of his voice and of his eager gray orbs—still softened from their habitual severity by the tears that had so

lately wet them—making such a hope, as, five minutes ago, she had thought never again to cherish, leap into splendid life in her sick heart.

“Is it possible?” she murmurs, almost inaudibly, “do you mean—that you are *not*?”

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They go down the hill, past the cottages, and the incurious peasants, hand in hand, her soul running over with a deep joy; and his occupied by an unfamiliar calm, that is yet backed by an ache of remorse, and by—what else? That “else” he himself neither could nor would define. He spends the whole of that day with Amelia, both lunching and dining with her and her family; a course which calls forth expressions of unaffected surprise, not at all tinged with malice—unless it be in the case of Sybilla, who has never been partial to him—from each of them.

“We have been thinking that Jim was going to jilt you, Amelia!” Cecilia has said with graceful badinage; nor, strange

to say, has she been at all offended when Jim has retorted, with equal grace and much superior ill-nature, that on such a subject no one could speak with more authority than she.

The large white stars are making the nightly sky almost as gorgeous as the day's departed majesty had done, ere Jim finds himself back at his hotel. His intention of quietly retreating to his own room is traversed by Byng, who, having evidently been on the watch for him, springs up the stairs, three steps at a time, after him.

"Where have you been all day?" he inquires impatiently.

"At the Anglo-Américain. I wonder you are not tired of always asking the same question and receiving the same answer to it."

"I am not so sure that I should always receive the same answer," replies the other, with a forced laugh—"but stop a bit!"—seeing a decided quickening of speed in his friend's upward movements—"my

mother is asking for you ; she has been asking for you all the afternoon ; she wants to speak to you before she goes."

" *Goes ?*"

" Yes, she is off at seven o'clock to-morrow morning—back to England : she had a telegram to-day to say that her old aunt, the one who brought her up, has had a second stroke. "No!"—seeing Jim begin to arrange his features in that decorous shape of grave sympathy which we naturally assume on such occasions—"it is no case of great grief ; the poor old woman has been quite silly ever since her last attack ; but mother thinks that she ought to be there, at—at the end ; to look after things, and so forth."

There is an alertness, a something that expresses the reverse of regret in the tone employed by Mrs. Byng's son in this detailed account of the causes of her imminent departure, which, even if his thoughts had not already sprung in that direction, would have set Burgoyne thinking as to the mode in which the young man before him

is likely to employ the liberty that his parent's absence will restore to him.

"I offered to go with her," says Byng, perhaps discerning a portion at least of his companion's disapprobation.

"And she refused?"

Byng looks down, and begins to kick the banisters—they are still on the stairs—idly with one foot.

"Mother is so unselfish that it is always difficult to make out what she really wishes; but—but I do not quite see of what use I should be to her if I did go."

There is a moment's pause; then Burgoyne speaks, in a dry, hortatory elder brother's voice:

"If you take my advice you will go home."

The disinterested counsel of wise elder brothers is not always taken in the spirit it merits; and there is no trace of docile and unquestioning acquiescence in Byng's monosyllabic—

"Why?"

“ Because, if you stay here, I think you will most likely get into mischief.”

The young man's usually good-humoured eyes give out a blue spark that looks rather like fight.

“ The same kind of mischief that you have been getting into during the past week ?” he inquires slowly.

The acquaintance with his movements evidenced by this last sentence, no less than the light they throw upon his own motives, stagger Jim, to the extent of making him accept the sneer in total silence. Is not it a richly deserved one ? But the sweet-natured Byng is already repenting it ; and there is something conciliatory and almost entreating in the spirit of his last remark :

“ I do not know what has happened to my mother,” he says, lowering his voice ; “ there is no one less of a *mauvaise langue* than she, as you know ; but in the case of——” —he breaks off and begins his sentence afresh ; “ she has been warning me against *them* again ; I can't find that she

has any reason to go upon ; but she has taken a violent prejudice against *her*. She says that it is one of her instincts ; and you—you have done nothing towards setting her right?"

Perhaps it may be that his young friend's reported metaphor of the "hippopotamus hide" has not served to render him any dearer to Jim ; but there is certainly no great suavity in his reply :

"Why should I?—it is no concern of mine."

"No concern of yours to stand by and see an angel's white robe besmirched by the foul mire of slander?" cries Byng indignantly, and lapsing into that high-flown mood which never fails to make his more work-a-day companion "see blood."

"When I come across such a disagreeable sight it will be time enough to decide whether I will interfere or not. At present I have not met with anything of the kind," returns he, resolutely putting an end to the dialogue by knocking at Mrs. Byng's portal, within which he is at once admitted.

The door of the bedroom communicating with the *salon* is open, and through it he sees the lady he has come to visit standing surrounded by gaping dress-baskets, strewn raiment, and scattered papers ; all the uncomfortable litter that speaks of an imminent departure. She joins him at once, and, shutting the door behind her, sits down with a fagged air.

“ I hear,” he begins—“ Willy tells me—I am very sorry to hear——”

“ Oh, there is no great cause for sorrow,” rejoins she quickly, as if anxious to disclaim a grief which might be supposed to check or limit her conversation—“ poor dear old auntie !—the people who love her best could not wish to keep her in the state she has been in for the last year ; oh, dear !”—sighing—“ how very dismal the dregs of life are ! do not you hope, Jim, that we shall die before we come to be ‘ happy releases ’ ?”

“ I do indeed,” replies he gravely ; “ I expect to be sick—dead-sick of life long before I reach that stage of it.”

He looks at her resentfully as she speaks, but she has so entirely forgotten her own application of the accented adjectives to his feelings for Amelia, that she replies only by a rather puzzled but perfectly innocent glance.

“I never was so unwilling to leave any place in my life,” she goes on presently, pursuing her own train of thought; “I do not know how to describe it—a sort of presentiment.”

He smiles.

“And yet I do not think that there are any owls in the Piazza to hoot under your windows!”

“Perhaps not,” rejoins she, with some warmth; “but what is still more unlucky than that happened to me last night; they passed the wine the wrong way round the table at the MacIvors. I was on thorns!”

“And you think that the wine going the wrong way round the table gave your aunt a stroke?” inquires Jim, with an irritating air of asking for information.

Mrs. Byng reddens slightly.

"I think nothing of the kind; I draw no inference; I only state a fact; it *is* a very unlucky thing to send the wine round the wrong way: if you had not spent your life among grizzly bears and cannibals you would have known it too!"

"There are no cannibals in the Rocky Mountains," corrects Jim quietly; and then they both laugh, and recommence their talk on a more friendly footing.

"I am not at all happy about Willy."

"No?"

"It is not his health so much—his colour is good, and his appetite not bad."

"Except the Fat Boy in 'Pickwick,' I never heard of anyone who had a better."

"But he is not himself; there is something odd about him!"

"Indeed!"

"Have not you noticed it yourself?—do not you think that there is something odd about him? Does not he strike you as odd?"

"*Odd?*" repeats Burgoyne slowly, reflecting in how extremely commonplace a

light both the virtues and vices of his fellow-traveller have always presented themselves to him; "it would never have occurred to me that Willy was *odd*; I cannot"—smiling—"encourage you in the idea that you have added one to the number of the world's eccentrics."

She sighs rather impatiently at his apparently intentional misunderstanding of her drift.

"‘Children are avenues to misfortune,’ as somebody said, and I think that, whoever he was, he was right. ‘If Jacob take a wife of the daughters of Heth, such as are those in the land, what good shall my life do to me?’"

"Why should you credit Jacob with any such intention?"

"I do not half like leaving him here by himself."

"*By himself?* You count me as no one then?"

"Oh yes, I do—I count you as a great deal; that is why I was so anxious to speak to you before I went; of course I do not

expect you to take upon yourself the whole responsibility of him, but you might keep an eye upon him."

He shrugs his shoulders.

"As I have to keep the other eye upon myself, I am afraid that the effort would but make me squint."

"It is his own generosity that I am afraid of—his self-sacrificing impulses; I am always in terror of his marrying someone out of pure good-nature, just to oblige her, just because she looked as if she wished it."

"Stephenson thinks that it does not much matter whom we marry, whether 'noisy scullions,' or 'acidulous vestals.'"

"I do not care what Stephenson thinks: ever since Willy was in Eton jackets, I have had a nightmare of his bringing me home as daughter-in-law some poor little governess with her nose through her veil, and her fingers through her gloves!"

Burgoyne smiles involuntarily as a vision of Elizabeth's daintily-clad hands flashes before his mental eye.

“I think you overrate his magnanimity ; I never saw him at all tender to anyone whose gloves were not beyond suspicion.”

Mrs. Byng laughs constrainedly.

“Well, if she has not holes in her gloves, she may have holes in her reputation, which is worse.”

Jim draws in his breath hard. The tug of war is coming, as the preceding leading remark, lugged in by the head and shoulders, sufficiently evidences. At all events he will do nothing to make its approach easier or quicker. He awaits it in silence.

“These Le Marchants—as they are friends of yours—I suppose that I ought not to say anything against them?”

“I am sure that you are too well-bred to do anything of the kind,” replies he precipitately, with a determined effort to stop her mouth with a compliment, which she is equally determined not to deserve.

“I do not think I am ; I am only well-bred now and then, when it suits me ; I am not going to be well-bred to-night.”

“ I am sorry to hear it.”

“ Whether they are friends of yours or not, I do not like them.”

“ I do not think that that matters much, either to you or to them.”

“ I have an instinct that they are adventures.”

“ I know for a certainty ”—with growing warmth—“ that they are nothing of the kind.”

“ Then why do not they go out anywhere ?”

“ Because they do not choose.”

“ Because no one asks them, more likely ! Why were they so determined not to be introduced to me ?”

“ How can I tell ? Perhaps ”—with a wrathful laugh—“ they did not like your looks !”

She echoes his false mirth with no inferior exasperation.

“ Who is ill-bred now ?”

Her tone calls him back to a sense of the ungentlemanlikeness and puerility of his conduct.

“ I ! ” — he replies contritely — “ undoubtedly I ! but—— ”

“ Do not apologize,” interrupts she, recovering her equanimity with that ease which she has transmitted to her son ; “ I like you for standing up for them if they *are* your friends ; and I hope that you will do the same good office for me when someone sticks pins into me behind my back ; but come now, let us be rational ; surely we may talk quietly about them without insulting each other, may not we ? ”

“ I do not know ; we can try. ”

“ I suppose ” — a little ironically — “ that you are not so sensitive about them but that you can bear me to ask a few perfectly harmless questions ? ”

He writhes. “ Of course ! of course ! what are they to me ? — they are nothing to me ! ”

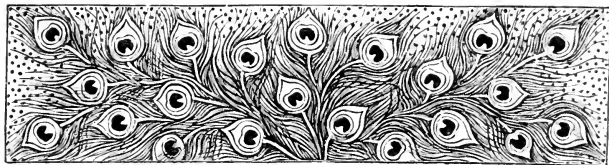
A look of incredulity, which she perhaps does not take any very great pains to conceal, spreads over her face.

“ Then you really will be doing me a great service if you tell me just exactly

all you know about them, good and bad."

"All I know about them," replies Jim in a rapid parrot-voice, as if he were rattling over some disagreeable lesson—"is that they were extremely kind to me ten years ago; that they had a beautiful place in Devonshire, and were universally loved and respected: I hear that they have let their place; so no doubt they are not so much loved and respected as they were; and now you know as much about the matter as I do!"





CHAPTER XXII.

“Welcome ever smiles; and Farewell goes out sighing.”

THIS last clause is not always true. For example, there is very little sighing in the farewells made to Mrs. Byng by the two young men who see her off at the Florence Railway Station. And Mrs. Byng herself has been too much occupied in manœuvring to get a few last private words with each of her escort to have much time for sighing either.

She would have been wounded if her old friend Jim had not come to see the last of her, and she would have been broken-hearted if her son had not paid her this

final attention ; and yet each necessarily destroys the *tête-à-tête* she is burning to have with the other. It is indelicate to implore your adored child not to go to the devil in the presence of an intimate friend, and it would give a not unnatural umbrage to that child if you urged the guardian friend to check his downward tendency while he himself is standing by. Nor do her two companions at all aid her in her strategy ; rather, they show a tendency to unite in baffling her, hanging together round her like a bodyguard, and effectually hindering the last words which she is pining to administer. Only once for a very few minutes does she succeed in outwitting them, when she despatches Willy to the bookstall to buy papers for her—an errand from which he returns with an exasperating celerity. The instant that his back is turned, Mrs. Byng addresses her companion in an eager voice of hurry and prayer :

“ You will keep an eye upon him ? ”

Silence.

“You will keep an eye upon him—promise?”

“I do not know what ‘keeping an eye upon him’ means in your vocabulary; often you and I do not use the same dictionary; until I know, I will not promise.”

“You will look after him; *do*, Jim!”

“My dear madam”—with irritation—
“let me go and buy your papers; and meanwhile urge *him* to look after *me*; I assure you that it is quite as necessary.”

“Fiddlesticks, with your unimaginative, unemotional nature——”

“H’m!”

“Your head will always take care of your heart.”

“Will it?”

“While he—promise me at least that, if you see him rushing to his ruin, you will telegraph to me?”

“Certainly, if you wish it; I will telegraph, ‘Willy rushing Ruin.’ At five-and-twenty centimes a word, it will cost you

sevenpence halfpenny ; not dear at the price, is it ?”

The mother reddens.

“You have become a very *mauvais plaisant* of late, Jim ; oh dear me ! here he is back again, tiresome boy !”

It is with feelings tied into a knot of complications, which he scarcely seeks to unravel, that Burgoyne walks away from the station, and from the good-natured staunch woman, whose last few moments in fair Firenze he has done his best to embitter. He is glad that she is gone, and he is sorry that she is gone. He is remorseful at his gladness, and he is ashamed of his sorrow, knowing and acknowledging that it results from no regret for her companionship, which he had been wont to prize ; but to the consciousness that she had stood like an angel with a drawn sword between her son and the Piazza d' Azeglio. Both angel and drawn sword are steaming away now, covered by a handsome travelling cloak down to the heels in a *coupé toilette*, and

the road to the Piazza lies naked and undefended, open to the light feet that are so buoyantly treading the flags beside him.

The step of youth is always light, but there is something aggressively springy in Byng's this morning; and though he does not *say* anything offensively cheerful, there is a ring in his voice that makes his kind friend long to hit him. He, the kind friend, is thankful when their ways part, without his having done him any bodily violence.

"You are late to-day," says Cecilia, as he enters the *salon*, giving him a nod of indifferent friendliness, while Sybilla crossly asks him to shut the door more quietly, and Amelia lays her hand lingeringly in his, with a silent smile of rapture; "we began to think you had had a relapse. I was just telling Amelia that the pace had been too good to last—ha, ha!"

Burgoyne has always found it difficult to laugh at Cecilia's jokes, and his now perfect intimacy with her relieves him from the necessity of even feigning to do so.

“ I have been seeing Mrs. Byng off,” he replies, with that slight shade of awkwardness in his tone which has accompanied his every mention of the mother or son since his explanation with his betrothed.

“ You let her go without getting that wedding present out of her, after all ?” cries Cecilia, who is in a rather tryingly playful mood.

“ Gone, is she ?” says Sybilla, with a somewhat ostentatious sigh of resentful relief ; “ well, I, for one, shall not cry. I am afraid that she was not very *simpatica* to me ; she was so dreadfully robust. Perhaps, now that she is no longer here to monopolise him, we shall be allowed to see something more of that nice boy.”

No one answers. Not one of her three listeners is at the moment disposed to chant or even echo praises of the “ nice boy.” Sybilla perversely pursues the subject.

“ I dare say that he has a delicacy about coming without a special invitation,” she says, “ where there is an invalid ; but you might tell him that on my good days no

one is more pleased to see their friends than I ; it does not even send my temperature up ; you might tell him that on my good days Dr. Coldstream says it does not even send my temperature up !”

Again no one answers.

“ You do not seem to be listening to what I am saying,” cries Sybilla frantically ; “ will you please tell him, Jim ?”

Jim lifts his heavy eyes from the ugly carpet on which they have been resting, and looks distastefully back at her.

“ I do not think that I will, Sybilla,” he replies slowly ; “ I do not think he cares a straw whether your temperature goes up or down. I think that he does not come here because—because he has found metal more attractive elsewhere.”

He makes this statement for no other reason than because it is so intensely unpleasant to him, because he realizes that he must have to face the fact it embodies, and to present it not only to himself, but to others. And each day that passes proves to him more and more conclusively that it is a

fact. He asks Byng no question as to the disposition of his day. He sees but little of him, having, indeed, changed the hours of his own breakfast and dinner in order to avoid having his appetite spoilt by the sight of so much unnecessary radiance opposite him ; but he knocks up against him, flower-laden, at the Strozzi steps ; he notes the splendour of his ties and waistcoats ; he grows to know the *Elizabeth-look* on his face, when he comes singing home at evening, as one knows the look of the western clouds that the sun's red lips have only just ceased to kiss, though no sun is any longer in sight ; and yet he does not interfere. He has received from the young man's mother a hasty letter, pencilled in the train, not an hour after she had quitted him ; another more leisurely, yet as anxious, from Turin ; a third from Paris, and lastly a telegram from Charing Cross. All bear the same purport.

“ Write ; keep an eye upon him ! ”

“ Write ; keep an eye upon him ! Write ! ”

And yet, though a full week had passed,

though he sees the son of his old ally drifting, faster than ever autumn leaf drifted on a flush October river, to the whirlpool she had dreaded for him, yet he sends her never a word. He writes her long letters, it is true, covers telegram-forms with pregnant messages, but they all find their ultimate home in the wood fire. When the moment comes, he finds it impossible to send them, since, upon searching his heart for the motives that have dictated them, he finds those motives to be no fidelity to an ancient friendship, no care for the boy's welfare, but, simply and nakedly, the satisfaction of his own spite, the easing of his own bitter jealousy.

So the Florentine post goes out daily, bearing no tale of Byng's backslidings to his native land, and Jim, brushing past him, answering him curtly, never going nearer to the Piazza d' Azeglio than the Innocenti—a good long street off—devotes himself to the frantic prosecution of a suit long since won, to the conquest of a heart

for eight weary years hopelessly, irrecoverably, pitiably his. His presence at the Anglo-Américain is so incessant, and his monopolizing of Amelia so unreasonable, that Sybilla—for the first time in her life really a little neglected—alternately runs up her pulse to 170 and drops it to 40.

“And then you wonder that I am anxious to be married,” says Cecilia, accompanying her future brother-in-law to the door, on the day on which the latter phenomenon has occurred, and wiping the angry tears from her plump cheeks. “I make no secret of it, I *am* madly anxious, I would marry anyone, I am desperate. Just think what my life will be when Amelia is gone; and though of course I shall be a great deal with her—she has promised that I shall be almost always with her” (Jim winces)—“yet of course it can’t be the same thing as having a home of your own.”

“We will do our best for you,” replies he, with a rather rueful smile and a sense of degradation; “but you know, my dear

Cis, anybody can lead a horse to the water, but it is not so easy to make him drink."

"That is quite true," replies Cecilia, one of whose most salient merits is an extreme unreadiness to be affronted, wiping her eyes as she speaks, "and I have no luck; such promising things turn up, and then come to nothing. Now, that clergyman the other day, whom we met at the Villa Careggi—such a pleasant gentlemanlike man—he was on the look-out for a wife, he told me so himself, and I know so much about the working of a parish, and next day he was off, Heaven knows where!"

Jim gives a slight shudder.

"I do not think you had any great loss in him," he says hastily; then, seeing her surprised air, "I mean, you know, that it is always said that a man is a better judge of another man than a woman is, and I did not like his looks; give us time, and we will do better for you than that."

Cecilia can no longer accuse her future relation of any slackness in the matter of expeditions. There is something of fever in the way in which he arrives each morning, armed with some new plan for the day, giving no one any peace until his project is carried out. It seems as if he must crowd into the last fortnight of Amelia's stay in Florence all the sight-seeing, all the junkets, all the enjoyment which ought to have been temperately spread over the eight years of their engagement.

One day—all nearer excursions being exhausted—they drive to Monte Senario, that sweet and silent spot, happily too far from Florence for the swarm of tourists to invade, where earth-weary men have set up a rest scarcely less dumb than the grave in a lonely monastery of the Order of La Trappe. Through the Porta San Gallo, along the Bologna Road they go. It is a soft, summer morning, with not much sun. Up, past the villas and gardens, where the Banksia roses and wistarias are rioting

over wall, and berceau and pergola, climbing even the tall trees. Round the very head of one young poplar two rose-trees—a yellow and a white one—are flinging their arms; flowered so lavishly that hardly a pin's point could be put between the blossoms. Up and up, a white wall on either hand. The dust lies a foot thick on the road; thick too on the monthly roses, just breaking into full pink flush; thick on themselves as the endless mule-carts come jingling down the hill with bells and red tassels, and a general air of what would be jollity were not that feeling so given the lie to by the poor jaded, suffering beasts. Up and up, till they leave stone walls and villas and olive-yards behind them, and are away among the mountains. At a very humble little house that has no air of an inn they leave the carriage, and climb up a rocky road, and through a perfumed pine-wood, to where the Trappist Monastery stands, in its perfect silence and isolation, on its hill-top, looking over its fir-woods at the

ranges of the Apennines, lying one behind the other in the stillness of the summer-day ; looking to distant Florence, misty and indistinct in her Arno plain ; looking to Fiesole, dwarfed to a molehill's dimensions.

“ I am told that one of the brothers is an Englishman ; I did not hear his name, but he is certainly English,” says Cecilia, as they mount the shallow, grass-grown steps to the monastery door. “ If I send up word that I am a fellow-countrywoman, perhaps he will come out and speak to me ; I am sure that it would be a very nice change for him, poor fellow !”

And it is the measure of the amount of Cecilia's acquaintance with the rules of the Order, that it is only half in jest that she makes the suggestion. But she does not repeat it to the lay-brother who stands, civil yet prohibitory, at the top of the flight, and who, in answer to Burgoyne's halting questions as to where they may go, politely answers that they may go anywhere — anywhere, *bien entendu*, outside.

So they wander aimlessly away. They push open a rickety gate, and passing an old dog, barking angry remonstrances at them from the retirement of a barrel, step along a grassy path that leads they know not whither. Two more young lay-brothers meet them, with their hands full of leopard's-bane flowers, which they have been gathering, probably to deck their altar with.

Amelia has passed her hand through Jim's arm—since his late increased kindness to her she has been led to many more little freedoms with him than she had hitherto permitted herself—and though she is very careful not to lean heavily or troublesomely upon him, yet the slight contact of her fingers keeps him reminded that she is there. Perhaps it is as well, since to-day he is conscious of such a strange tendency to forget everything, past, present, and to come. Has one of the monks' numb hands been laid upon his heart to lull it into so frozen a quiet? To-day he feels as if it were absolutely impossible to him to experience either

pleasure or pain; as if to hold Elizabeth in his own arms, or see her in Byng's, would be to him equally indifferent. His apathy in this latter respect is to be put to the test sooner than he expects. Not indeed that Elizabeth is lying in Byng's arms—it would be a gross misrepresentation to say so, she being, on the contrary, most decorously poised on a camp-stool—least romantic of human resting-places—when they come suddenly upon her and him in the course of their prowling round the inhospitable walls. She is sitting on her camp-stool, and he is lying on his face in the grass, just not touching her slim feet.

The advancing party perceive the couple advanced upon before the latter are aware of their nearness; long enough for the former to realize how very much *de trop* they will be, yet not long enough to enable them to escape unnoticed. Jim becomes aware of the very second at which Amelia recognises the unconscious pair, by an involuntary pinch of her fingers upon his arm, which a moment later she hastily

drops. His own first feeling on catching sight of them—no, not his *very* first—his very first is as if someone had run a darning-needle into his heart—but almost his first is to shout out to them in loud warning :

“Be on your guard! we are close to you!”

He will never forgive either himself or them if they ignorantly indulge in any endearment under his very eyes. But they do not. There are no interlacing arms to disentwine, nothing to make them spring apart, when at length they look up and take in the fact—an unwelcome fact it must needs be—of their invasion.

On hearing approaching footsteps, Byng rolls over on his back in the grass; on perceiving that most of the footsteps are those of ladies, he springs to his feet. Elizabeth remains sitting on her camp-stool.

“What a coincidence!” cries Cecilia, breaking into a laugh.

They are all grateful to her for the

remark, though it is rather a silly one, as there is no particular coincidence in the case. Burgoyne is irritatedly conscious that Amelia is covertly observing him, and before he can check himself he has thrown over his shoulder at her one of those snubbing glances from which, for the last ten days, he has painstakingly and remorsefully refrained. It is not a happy moment to look at poor Amelia, as she has not yet cooled down from the heat of her climb through the fir-wood—a heat that translates itself into patchy flushes all over her face, not sparing even her forehead. Elizabeth is flushed too. She has not met Miss Wilson since she had declined Burgoyne's offer of bringing his betrothed to see her, and in her deprecating eyes there is a guilty and tremulous recollection of this fact. But below the guilt and the deprecation and the tremor, what else is there in Elizabeth's eyes? What of splendid and startling, and that comes but once in a lifetime? Rather than be obliged to give a name to that vague

radiance, Jim turns his look back upon his own too glowing dear one.

“Did you come here all alone? You two all alone? What fun!” asks Cecilia; with an air of delighted curiosity.

Again her companions inwardly thank her. It is the question that both—though with different degrees of eagerness—have been thirsting to ask.

“Alone?—oh no!” replies Elizabeth, with that uneasy, frightened look that Burgoyne has always noticed on her face when she has been brought into unwilling relation with strangers. “My mother is here—she came with us; why, where is she?”—looking round with a startled air—“she was here a moment ago.”

A grim smile curves Jim’s mouth. It is evident that the unhappy Mrs. Le Marchant, worn out with her *rôle* of duenna, has slipped away without being missed by either of her companions. Would they have even discovered her absence but for Cecilia’s query?

“Mrs. Le Marchant was here a moment

ago," echoes Byng, addressing the company generally; "but" — dodging his friend's eyes—"she said she was a little stiff from sitting so long; she must be quite close by."

"I will go and look for her," says Elizabeth, confused, and rising from her rickety seat as she speaks; but Amelia, who is nearest to her, puts out a friendly hand in prohibition.

"Oh, do not stir!" she cries, smiling kindly and admiringly. "You look so comfortable. Let *me* go and search for Mrs. Le Marchant; I — I — should be afraid to sit down, I am so hot. I should like to find her; Cecilia will help me, and Mr. Byng will show us the way."

It is not always that generous actions meet their meed of gratitude from those for whose sake they are performed; and, though Burgoyne recognises the magnanimity of his *fiancée's* line of conduct, thankfulness to her for it is not the feeling uppermost in his mind when, a few moments later, he finds himself stand-

ing in uneasy *lôte-à-lôte* over the seated Elizabeth.

“Will not you sit down?” she asks presently, adding, with a low, timid laugh, “I do not know why I should invite you, as if”—glancing round at the sun-steeped panorama—“this were my drawing-room.”

He complies, taking care to occupy a quite different six feet of herbage from that which still bears the imprint of Byng’s lengthy limbs. The grass grows cool and fresh, full of buttercups and tall blue bugle ; out of them the gray monastery wall rises, in its utter lifeless silence, with its small barred windows. Was ever any building, within which is human life, so unutterably still? As he leans his elbow among the king-cups, Jim says to himself that the lovers had chosen their place well and wisely—that the consciousness of the austere, denied lives going on so close behind them, in their entire joylessness, must have given an added point, a keener edge to the poignancy of their own enjoyment of the sweet summer day outside.

“You have not been to see us for a long time,” says Elizabeth presently, in a small and diffident voice, after having waited until the probability of his speaking first has become a mere possibility, and even that a faint one.

He replies baldly, “No.”

His look is fixed on a knoll, whence the monks must have gathered their leopard's bane. They cannot have gathered much, so bounteously do the gay yellow flowers still wave on the hillock. Nearer stands a colony of purple orchises, and from them the eye travels away to the silent fir-wood, to the range of misty hills and the distant plain, touched now and again by a vague hint of sunshine, that makes one for the moment feel sure that one has detected *Duomo* or *Campanile*. How many hill ranges there are! One can count six or seven, like the ridges in a gigantic ploughed field, one behind another—all solemnly beautiful on this windless day of grave and ungaudy sweetness. Has the young man been reckoning the ranks of

the Apennines, that it is so long before he adds a low-voiced, mocking question to his monosyllable ?

“ Have you missed me very much ? ”

The woman addressed seems in no hurry to answer. She has drawn her narrow brown brows together, as if in the effort to hit truth in her nicest shade in her answer. Then she speaks with a sort of soft self-remonstrance :

“ Oh, surely ! I *must* have missed you—you were so extraordinarily, so unaccountably kind to us ! ”

There is not one of us who would not rather be loved for what we *are* than for what we *do* ; so it is perhaps no wonder if the young woman’s reply strikes with an unreasonable chill upon the asker’s heart.

“ You must have been very little used to kindness all your life,” he says, with some brusqueness, “ to be so disproportionately grateful for my trumpery civilities.”

She hesitates a moment, then :

“ You are right,” she replies ; “ I have

not received any great kindness in my life—justice, well, yes, I suppose so—but no, not very much mercy.”

Her candid and composed admission of a need for mercy whets yet farther that pained curiosity which has always been one of the strongest elements in his uncomfortable interest in her. But the very sharpness of that interest makes him shy away awkwardly from the subject of her past.

“I always think,” he says, “that there is something fatuous in a man’s apologizing to a lady for not having been to see her, as if the loss were hers, and not his.”

“Is there? All the same, I am sorry that you did not come.”

This simple and unsophisticated implication of a liking for him would have warmed again the uneasy heart that her former speech had chilled had not he, under the superficial though genuine regret of her face, seen, still shining with steady lustre, that radiance which has as little been called forth by, as it can be dimmed

by him or anything relating to him. And so he passes by in silence the expression of that sorrow which he bitterly knows to be so supportable.

The still spirit of the day seems to have touched the very birds. They sing a few low notes in veiled, chastened voices from the fir-wood, and again are silent. The clock tells the hours in quarters to the doomed lives inside the monastery, self-doomed to suffering and penance and incarceration, even with the winning blue of the Tuscan sky above their tonsured heads, with the forget-me-nots pressing their feet, and the nightingales singing endless love-songs to them from the little dark forest nigh at hand.

“I suppose,” says Elizabeth presently, in a reflective tone, “that the fact is, when people are in your position—I mean on the brink of a great deep happiness—they forget all lesser things?”

He snatches a hasty glance of suspicion at her. Is this her revenge for his neglect of her? But nothing can look more inno-

cent or less ironical than her small profile, bent towards the gigantic forget-me-nots and the pulmonaria, azure as gentians.

“Perhaps.”

“The big fish”—her little face breaking into one of her lovely smiles, which, by a turn of her head from side to full, she offers in its completeness to his gaze—“swallows up all the little gudgeons! Poor little gudgeons.”

“Poor little gudgeons!” he echoes stupidly, and then begins to laugh at his own wool-gathering.

“And now I suppose you will be going directly—going home?” pursues she, looking at him and his laughter with a soft surprise.

“I hope so; and—and—you too?”

She gives a start, and the sky-coloured nosegay in her hand drops into her lap.

“We—we? Why should *we* go home? We have nothing pleasant to go to, and”—looking round with a passionate relish at mountain, and suffused far plain, and sappy spring grass—“we are so well—so infinitely

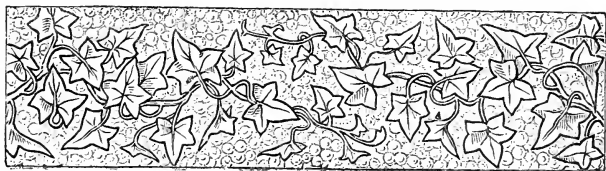
well here!" Then, pulling herself together, and speaking in a more composed key, "But yes, of course we, too, shall go by-and-by; this cannot last for ever—nothing lasts for ever. That is the one thought that has kept me alive all these years; but now——"

She breaks off.

"But now?"

Even as he watches her, putting this echoed interrogation, he sees the radiance breaking through the cloud his question had gathered, as a very strong sun breaks through a very translucent exhalation.

"But now?" she repeats vaguely, and smiling to herself, forgetful of his very presence beside her—"But now? Did I say 'But now?' Ah, here they are back again!"



CHAPTER XXIII.

“I AM going to turn the tables on you,” says Amelia next morning to her lover, after the usual endearments, which of late he has been conscientiously anxious not to scant or slur, have passed between them, very fairly executed by him, and adoringly accepted and returned by her; “you are always arranging treats for me; now I have planned one for you!”

She looks so beaming with benevolent joy as she makes this statement, that Jim stoops and drops an extra kiss—not in the bond—upon her lifted face. “Indeed, dear!” he answers kindly, “I do not quite know what I have done to deserve it; but I hope it is a nice one.”

“It is very nice—delightful.”

“Delightful, eh?” echoes he, raising his brows, while a transient wonder crosses his mind as to what project she or anyone else could suggest to him that, at this juncture of his affairs, could merit that epithet; “well, am I to guess what it is? or are you going to tell me?”

Amelia’s face still wears that smile of complacent confidence in having something pleasant to communicate which has puzzled her companion.

“We have never been at Vallombrosa, have we?” asks she.

“Never.”

“Well, we are going there to-morrow.”

“Are we? is that your treat?” inquires he, wondering what of peculiarly and distinctively festal for him this expedition may be supposed to have above all their former ones.

“And we are not going alone.”

“There is nothing very exceptional in that; Cecilia is mostly good enough to lend us her company.”

“I am not thinking of Cecilia; I have persuaded”—the benevolent smile broadening across her cheeks—“I have persuaded some friends of yours to join us.”

It does not for an instant cross his mind either to doubt or to affect uncertainty as to who the friends of whom she speaks may be; but the suggestion is so profoundly unwelcome to him, that not even the certainty of mortifying the unselfish creature before him can hinder him from showing it. Her countenance falls.

“You are not glad?” she asks crest-fallenly, “you are not pleased?”

It is impossible for him to say that he is, and all that is left to him is to put his vexation into words that may be as little as possible fraught with disappointment to his poor hearer’s ear.

“I—I—had rather have had you to myself.”

“Would you really?” she asks, in the almost awed tones of one who, from being quite destitute, has had the Koh-i-Noor put into his hand, and whose fingers are

afraid to close over the mighty jewel ;
“would you really ? then I am sorry I asked them ; but ”—with intense wistfulness—“if you only knew how I long to give you a little pleasure, a little enjoyment—you who have given me so infinitely much.”

If Miss Wilson were ever addicted to the figure of speech called irony, she might be supposed to be employing it now ; but one glance at her simple face would show that it expressed nothing but adoring gratitude. Her one good fortnight has spread its radiant veil backwards over her eight barren years.

He takes her hand, and passes the fingers across his lips, murmuring indistinctly and guiltily behind them :

“Do I really make you happy ?”

“Do you ?” — echoes she, while the transfiguring tears well into her glorified pale eyes—“I should not have thought it possible that so much joy could have been packed into any fortnight as I have had crammed into mine !”

They have to set off to Vallombrosa at seven o'clock in the morning, an hour at which few of us are at our cleverest, handsomest, or our best tempered ; nor is the party of six, either in its proportion of women to men—four to two—or in its component parts, a very well adjusted one. They are too numerous to be contained in one carriage, and are therefore divided into two separate bands — three and three. Whether by some manœuvre of the well-meaning Amelia, or by some scarcely fortunate accident, Burgoyne finds himself seated opposite to his betrothed and to Elizabeth ; while Byng follows in the second vehicle as *vis-à-vis* to Cecilia and Mrs. Le Marchant. There is a general feeling of wrongness about the whole arrangement—a sense of mental discomfort equivalent to that physical one of having put on your clothes inside out, or buttoned your buttons into unanswering button-holes. ;

Mrs. Le Marchant's face, as Burgoyne catches sight of it now and then, as some

turn in the road reveals the inmates of the closely-following second carriage to his view, wears that uneasy and disquieted look which always disfigures it when there is any question of her being brought into personal relation with strangers. And Elizabeth, of whom he has naturally a much nearer and more continuous view, is plainly ill-at-ease. Miss Wilson has not thought it necessary to mention to her lover how strong had been the opposition to her plan on the part of the objects of it ; nor, that it was only because her proposal was made *vivâ voce*, and therefore unescapable, that it had been reluctantly accepted at last. At first Burgoyne had attributed Elizabeth's evident ill-at-easeness to her separation from Byng ; but he presently discovers that it is what she possesses, and not what she lacks, that is the chief source of her *malaise*. During the latter part of his own personal intercourse with her she had been, when in his company, sometimes sad, sometimes wildly merry ; but always entirely natural. Strange as it

may seem, it is obviously the presence of Amelia that puts constraint upon her. Before the spirit of that most unterrifying of God's creatures, Elizabeth's "stands rebuked." Once or twice he sees her inborn gaiety—that gaiety whose existence he has so often noted as it struggles up from under the mysterious weight of sorrow laid upon it—spurt into life, only to be instantly killed by the reassumption of that nervous formal manner which not all Amelia's gentle efforts can break through.

A very grave trio they drive along through the grave day. For it is, alas! a grave day—overcast, now turning to rain, now growing fair again awhile. Not a grain of Italy's summer curse, her choking white dust, assails their nostrils. It must have rained all night. Through the suburbs by the river, crossing and recrossing that ugly iron interloper the railway; by the river flowing at the foot of the fair green hills, so green, so green on this day of ripe accomplished spring. The whole

country is one giant green garland, of young wheat below and endless vine necklaces above—necklaces of new juicy, just-born, yet vigorous vine-leaves. The very river runs green with the reflection of the endless verdure on its banks. The road is level as far as Pontassieve, the town through which they roll, and then it begins to mount—mounts between garden-like hills, dressed in vine-leaves and iris-flowers, and the dull fire of red clover; while the stream twists in flowing companionship at the valley bottom, until they turn abruptly away from it, up into a steep and narrow valley, almost a gorge, and climb up and up one side of it, turning and winding continually to break the steepness of the ascent. However broken, it is steep still. But who would wish to pass at more than a foot's pace through this great sheet of lilac irises wrapping the mountain side, past this bean-field that greets the nostrils with its homely familiar perfume, along this wealthy bit of hedge, framed wholly of honeysuckle in flower.

At sight of the latter Elizabeth gives a little cry.

“Oh, what honeysuckle! I must have some! I must get out! Tell him to stop!”

In a moment her commands are obeyed; in another moment Byng has sprung out of the second carriage and is standing beside her. The door of Byng's vehicle is stiff apparently, and a sardonic smile breaks over the elder man's face as he hears the noise of the resounding kicks administered to it by the younger one's impatient foot. But he need not have been in such a hurry—no one interferes with his office of rifling the hedge of its creamy and coral bugles.

Burgoyne gets out of the carriage; but it is only to walk to the other one and assume Byng's vacated seat.

“Are you going to change places?” Amelia has asked rather chapfallenly as he leaves her; and he has given her hand a hasty pressure, and answered affectionately—

“It will not be for long, dear ; but you know”—with an expressive glance, and what he rather too sanguinely hopes looks like a smile in the direction of the flower-gatherers—“fair play is a jewel !”

If his departure from the one vehicle is deplored, it is not welcomed at the other. Cecilia asks the same question as her sister had put, though the intonation is different.

“Are you going to change places ?”—adding—“do not you think we did very well as we were ?”

But probably he is too much occupied in wrestling with the stiff door to hear her, for he makes no answer beyond getting in. The only reward that he receives for his piece of self-sacrifice is a rapturous look of gratitude from Byng, when he perceives the changed position of his affairs, and that recompense Jim had far rather have been without.

They are off again. Being now second in the little procession, Burgoyne has but meagre and difficult views of the first ; but now and again, when the road describes

an acuter angle than usual, he can by turning his whole body, under pretext of admiring the view, snatch a glimpse of all three occupants leaning their heads sociably together, evidently in bright light talk. After all, he had deceived himself. It is he and not Amelia who had made her shy. Even when he cannot see her, there come to his ears little wafts of laughter, in which her voice is mixed. He catches himself trying to recall whether she had laughed even once during the period of his being her companion. There is not much mirth in his own carriage. What a kill-joy he has grown! Cecilia, though her heart is as pure as the babe unborn of any serious designs on Byng, of which indeed she has long seen the fruitlessness, yet thinks a sulky brother-in-law-elect but a poor exchange for a handsome young acquaintance, whom neither his good manners nor the amount of his intimacy allow to sit opposite to her in grumpy silence. Mrs. Le Marchant is obviously as ill at ease as was her daughter when in his fellowship, though in

this case a little observation shows him that he counts for nothing in her discomfort of mind, but that she is watching the other half of the party with an anxiety as keen, if almost as covert, as his own. She is too well-bred indeed not to endeavour to keep up a decent show of conversation, but as neither of her companions makes any effort to second her, an ever-deepening silence falls upon them as they advance, nor, as the day grows older, is the weather calculated to exhilarate their spirits.

The sky's frown becomes more and more pronounced the higher they mount. Through a village nobly seated on its hill-top, but, like most Italian townlets, squalid enough on a nearer view—up and up—up and up—till they reach what were once groves of stately chestnuts, but where the hungry Tuscan axe has left nothing but twigs and saplings, but never a spreading tree; then on into the fir-woods, which are woods indeed, though even here the hatchet's cruel tooth has begun to bite. No sooner is their dark umbrage reached

than the mist, that has been hanging with threatening lowness above the travellers' heads, comes down close, blinding, clinging like wet flannel, and as thick.

"Perhaps it will lift," Jim says, with a sort of dismal unlikely hopefulness as he strains his eyes, trying to look down the straight solemn fir aisles, with their files upon files of tall stems, that seem to be seen only as if through a thick gauze. Neither of his companions has the spirit necessary to echo the supposition. The road winds endlessly, steeper and steeper up through the mist. The tired horses step wearily, and the unfortunate pleasure-seekers are beginning to think that the muffled monotony of firs, of winding road, of painfully labouring horses, will never end, when the vetturino turns round with a smile on his fog-wet face, and says, "*Vallombrosa!*"

Under other circumstances, the announcement might have been cheering, might have excited a poetic curiosity ; but as it is, the hood of the vehicle—necessarily

raised some miles back—is so far poked forward that nothing is to be seen but a pour of rain—the rain has begun to descend in torrents—a glass-door in a house-wall opening to admit them, and a waiter holding up a green umbrella to protect their descent. Neither he nor the landlord, nor yet the chambermaid, show any signs of mirth or wonder at their arrival among the clouds on such a day. They are used to mad Inglese. And amongst the mad Inglese themselves there is certainly no temptation to mad merriment. On such an occasion there is nothing to do but eat, so they lunch dismally in a long, bare dining-room, with a carpetless floor, a table laid for a grossly improbable number of guests, and a feeling of searching cold. Having spun out their scanty meal to the utmost limits of possibility, and washed it down with the weakest red wine that ever lived in a wicker bottle, they pass into a funereal *salon*, to which the waiter invites them. Someone makes the cheering announcement that they have

as yet been here only half an hour, and that the horses must have two full hours to bait before there can be any question of beginning the return journey. And then they amble about the room, looking at the dreadful lithographs of Italy's plain King and fair Queen on the walls ; at the venerable journals and gaudy English story-book, so dull as to have been forgotten by its owner, on the table. Their spirits are not heightened by a pervading sense as of being in a cellar, minus the wine. The equipment of this pleasant apartment is completed by a half-dead nosegay of what must once have been charming mountain blossoms. The sight decides them. They must go out. Perhaps even through this opaque cloud they may dimly see the mountain flowers growing, the mountain brooks dashing, which John Milton has told them that—

“the Etrurian shades,
High over-arch'd imbower.”

They all catch at the suggestion, when made by Byng, and presently sally forth

to see as much of Vallombrosa as a fog that would not have disgraced the Strand, as a close blanket of almost *confluent* rain, and as umbrellas held well down over their cold noses, will let them ; Mrs. Le Marchant alone declines to be one of the party, and is left sitting, swaddled in all the superfluous wraps, on a horse-hair chair in the *salon*, to stare at the wall and at King Humbert's ugly face, until such time as her companions see fit to release her. It is no wonder that Burgoyne overhears her eagerly whispering to Elizabeth a request that she will not stay too long away. And Elizabeth, whose spirits have gone up like a rocket at the prospect of a taste of the fresh air, and who knows what else, lays her little face, crowned with a deer-stalking cap, against her mother's, and promises, and skips away.

At first they all five keep together, wet but sociable. They ask their way to the Paradiso—the name sounds ironical—and set off climbing up through the fir-wood in the direction indicated ; along a path

which in fair weather must be heavenly with piny odours, but which is now only a miry alternative of dripping stones and muddy puddles. Through the mist they see indeed fair flowers gleaming, yellow anemones, unfamiliar and lovely, but they are too drenched to pluck. The sound of falling water guides them to where the clear brook—clear even to-day—falls in little cascades down the hill's face between the pines. How delicious to sit on its flat stones some hot summer's noon, with your hands coolly straying among its grasses, or dabbling in its bright water; but to-day they can but look at it sadly from the low bridge, saying sighingly, "If!"

They reach the goal, some cross, and all floundering, the ladies with draggled skirts and cold, dank ankles. The Paradiso is a little house, a *dépendance* apparently of the hotel below—apparently also tenantless and empty. It is built on the bare rock, looking sheer down on—what? on a blanket of fog. What does, what can,

that maddening blanket conceal? Oh, if they could but tear it in pieces, rend it asunder, hack it with knives; by any means abolish its unsightly veil from over the lovely face, they will now, with all their climbing, all their early rising, never see! But will not they? Even as they look, despairingly straining their eyes, in the vain effort to pierce that obscure and baffling veil, there is a movement in it, a stirring of the inert mass of vapour; a wind has risen, and is blowing coldly on their brows, and in a moment, as it seems, the maddening wet curtain is swept away and up, as by some God-hand, the hand of some spirit that has heard their lament and has pitied them and said, "They have come from afar; it is their only chance; let us show it to them." The curtain has rolled up and up, the sombre fir-wood starts out, and the emerald meadows, the lowest and nearest range of hills, then the next, and then the next, and then the furthest and highest of all. There they stand revealed, even the city, Florence,

far away. They can make out her Duomo, small and dim with distance, yet certainly there; in the sudden effulgence all the valley alight and radiant. Range behind range stand the hills; belated vapour wreaths floating, thin as lawn, up their flanks; wonderful dreamy patches of radiance on the far slopes; marvellous amethysts starring their breasts. Mystery and beauty, colour and space, sky and lovely land, where, five minutes ago, there was nothing but choking fog. Burgoyne stands as in a trance, vaguely conscious—trance-wise too—that Elizabeth is near him; all his soul passed into his eyes; stands—how long? He hardly knows. Before that fair sight time seems dead; but even as he yet looks, smiling as one smiles at anything surpassingly lovely, the cloud-wreaths float downwards again, wreaths at first, then great volumes, then one universal sheet of vapour, impenetrably dense as before. Vanished are the Apennine slopes, sun-kissed and dreamy; vanished the distant Arno plain; vanished

even the near pines. He can scarce see his hand before him. And yet he can see Elizabeth's face transfigured and quivering, lifted to his—yes, to *his*—though Byng is on her other side ; her eyes full of tender tears of ravishment, while her low voice says sighingly :

“ It is gone ; but we have seen it ! Nothing can ever take that from us ! nothing ! nothing ! ”

And although the next moment she is reabsorbed into the fog and Byng, though for the rest of the deplorable walk he scarce catches sight again of the little brown head and the soaked deer-stalking cap, yet it makes a gentle warmth about his chilled heart to think that, in her moments of highest emotion, it is her impulse to turn to him.



CHAPTER XXIV.

“ Oh, gentle Proteus, Love’s a mighty lord,
And hath so humbled me that I confess
There is no grief to his correction
Nor to his service no such joy on earth.
Now no discourse except it be of Love ;
Now can I break my fast, dine, sup and sleep
Upon the very naked name of Love.”

Not once again, so long as they remain at Vallombrosa, does the envious cloud-blanket lift ; and, after slopping about for sometime longer, in the vain hope that it will, Burgoyne and his two female relatives-elect return to the inn, all fallen very silent. The other two members of the party have disappeared into the fog. At the door of the hotel they find Mrs. Le Marchant, who has broken from her cerements, and is

looking anxiously out. As she catches sight of them the look of tension on her face lessens.

“Oh, here you are!” says she. “I am so glad; and the others—no doubt the others are close behind.”

“We know nothing about the others,” replies Cecilia, with some ill-humour, taking upon her the office of spokeswoman, which neither of her companions seems in any hurry to assume; “the others took French leave of us an hour ago. Oh dear, how wet I am! What a horrible excursion! How I detest Vallombrosa!”

Amelia is to the full as wet as her sister: nothing can well be more lamentable than the appearance of either; and upon Amelia's face there is, in addition to a handsome share of splashes of rain, a look of mortification and crestfallenness; but she now puts in her word, with her usual patience and thoughtful good-temper.

“I do not think you need be in the least anxious about them,” she says, observing the immediate relapse into what seems

an exaggerated concern following instantly upon Cecilia's remark on Mrs. Le Marchant's features; "they were with us not long ago. We were certainly all together not so long ago; they were with us at the Paradiso—they were certainly with us at the Paradiso?" turning with an interrogative air to Burgoyne.

"Yes, they were certainly with us at the Paradiso," he assents, not thinking it necessary to add why he is so very certain as to this fact.

"They must have so much inducement to loiter this charming weather," cries Cecilia, with an exasperated laugh. "Oh, how wet I am! I do not expect that we shall any of us forget Vallombrosa in a hurry! I shall go and ask the chambermaid to lend me some dry shoes and stockings."

With these words she walks towards the staircase and climbs it, leaving a muddy imprint on each step to mark her progress as she mounts.

Amelia does not at once follow her

example. She remains standing where she was, her arms hanging listlessly by her sides, and the expression of crestfallenness deepened on her fagged face. Her lover is touched by her look, and, going up to her, lays his hand kindly and solicitously on her shoulder.

“Umbrellas are not what they were in my days,” he says, trying to smile. “You are quite as wet as Cis, though you do not proclaim your sufferings nearly so loudly. Had not you better go and see whether the chambermaid owns *two* pairs of dry stockings?”

She lifts her eyes with wistful gratitude to his.

“This is my treat,” she says slowly; “my first treat to you; oh, poor Jim!”

There is a depth of compassion in her tone as disproportioned to the apparent cause as had been Mrs. Le Marchant’s anxiety for her daughter’s return, and beneath it he winces.

“Why do you pity me?” he inquires half indignantly. “Am I—

“ ‘A milksop ; one that never in his life
Felt so much cold as over shoes in snow ?’

What do I care for a little rain ?” Adding cheerfully, “ You shall give me a second treat, dear ; we will come here again by ourselves when the sun shines.”

“ By ourselves—when the sun shines !” echoes she, as if repeating a lesson ; and then she goes off docilely, in obedience to his suggestion, in search of dry raiment.

He rejoins Mrs. Le Marchant, whose unaccountable fears have led her beyond the house’s shelter out into the rain, where she stands looking down that river of mud which represents the road by which she hopes to see the truants reappear.

“ I think you are unnecessarily alarmed,” he says, in a reassuring and remonstrating tone. “ What harm could have happened to them ?”

She does not answer, her eyes, into which the rain is beating under her umbrella brim, still fixed upon the empty road.

“ Is she—is she apt to take cold ?” he

asks, his own tone catching the infection of her vague and nameless disquiet.

“Yes—no—not particularly, I think. Oh, it is not that!”—her composure breaking down into an unaffected outburst of distress—“It is not that! Do not you understand? Oh, how unwilling I was to come here to-day! It is—do not you see? Oh, I should not mind in the least if it had been you that were with her!”

“If it had been I that was with her?” repeats Jim slowly, not at the first instant comprehending, nor even at the second quite taking in the full, though unintentional, uncomplimentariness of this speech; which however, before his companion again takes up her parable, has tinglingly reached—what? His heart, or only his vanity? They lie very close together.

“Why did not he go home with his mother?” pursues Mrs. Le Marchant, still in that voice of intense vexation. “It would have been so much more natural that he should, and I am sure that she wished it.”

"You are making me feel extremely uncomfortable," says Burgoyne gravely; "when I remember that it was I who introduced him to you."

"Oh, I am not blaming you!" replies she, with an obvious effort to resume her usual courteous manner. "Please do not think that I am blaming you. How could you help it?"

"I thought you liked him."

"Oh, so I do—so we both do!" cries the poor woman agitatedly. "That is the worst of it! If I did not like him, I should not mind; at least, I should not mind half so much."

"I am very sorry," he begins; but she interrupts him.

"Do not be sorry," she says remorsefully; "you have nothing to say to it. I do not know, I am sure"—looking gratefully at him through the rain—"why I am always regaling you with my worries; but you are so dependable—we both feel that you are so dependable."

"Am I?" says he, with a melancholy air

that does not argue much gratification at the compliment. "Do not be too sure of that."

But she does not heed his disclaimer.

"We have been so happy here," she goes on; "I do not mean *here*"—looking round with an involuntary smile at the envelope of wet vapour that encases them both—"but at Florence; so peacefully, blessedly happy, she and I—you do not know"—with an appealing touch of pathos—"what a dear little companion she is!—so happy that I naturally do not want our memory of the place to be spoilt by any painful *contretemps*. You can understand that, cannot you?"

It is senseless of him; but yet, little as he can comprehend why it should be so, the idea of Byng's love being described as a "painful *contretemps*" presents itself not disagreeably to his mind. For whatever mysterious reason, it is apparent that even Byng's own mother cannot be much more adverse to his suit than is the lady before him.

“I can perfectly enter into your feelings,” he answers, with sympathetic gravity; “but do not you know that ‘a watched pot never boils’? As long as you are looking for them, they will never appear; but the moment that your back is turned they will probably come round the corner at once.”

“I think it is the truest proverb in the world,” she says, with an impatient sigh; but she allows him to guide her and her umbrella back to the inn.

Burgoyne’s prediction is not verified; probably he had no very great faith in it himself. Mrs. Le Marchant’s back has, for the best part of an hour, been turned upon the mountain road, and the stragglers have not yet rejoined the main body. There has been plenty of time for Cecilia to be thoroughly dried, warmed, comforted, and restored to good humour; for the *vetturino* to send in and ask whether he shall not put the horses to; for Amelia to exhaust all her little repertory of soothing hypotheses; for Mrs. Le Marchant to stray in restless misery from *salon* to *salle-à-manger*

and back again, and for Burgoyne to pull gloomily at a large cigar in the hall by himself, before at length the voices of the truants are heard.

Burgoyne being, as I have said, in the hall, and therefore nearest the door of entrance, has the earliest sight of them. His first glance tells him that the blow apprehended by Mrs. Le Marchant has fallen. Of Elizabeth, indeed, he scarcely catches a glimpse, as she passes him precipitately, hurrying to meet her mother, who, at the sound of her voice, has come running into the outer room. But Byng! Byng has not experienced so many very strong emotions in his short life as to have had much practice in veiling them from the eyes of others when they come, and the gauze now drawn over his intolerable radiance is of the thinnest description. Again that earnest desire to hit him *hard* assails the elder friend.

"Why, you are back before us!" cries the young man.

"Yes, we are back before you," replies

Burgoyne; and if the penalty had been death, he could not at that moment have added one syllable to the acrid assent.

"Are we late?" asks Elizabeth tremulously; "I am afraid we are late—I am afraid we have kept you waiting! Oh, I am so sorry!"

She looks with an engaging timidity of apology from one to other of the sulky countenances around her; and Burgoyne stealing a look at her, their eyes meet. He is startled by the singularity of expression in hers. Whatever it denotes, it certainly is not the stupid simplicity of rapture to be read, in print as big as a poster's, in Byng's. And yet among the many ingredients that go to make up that shy fevered beam, rapture is undoubtedly one.

"Did you lose yourselves? Did you go further into the wood?" asks Cecilia, with a curiosity that is, considering the provocation given, not unjustifiable.

They both reply vaguely that they had lost themselves, that they had gone deeper

into the wood. It is obvious to the meanest intelligence that neither of them has the slightest idea where they have been.

“I may as well tell the driver to put the horses in,” says Burgoyne, in a matter-of-fact voice, glad of an excuse to absent himself.

When he comes back, he finds the Le Marchants standing together in the window, talking in a low voice, and Byng hovering near them. It is evident to Jim that the elder woman has no wish for converse with the young man; but in his present condition of dizzy exhilaration, he is quite unaware of that fact. He approaches her indeed (as the unobserved watcher notes) with a dreadful air of filial piety, and addresses her in a tone of apology it is true, but with a twang of intimacy that had never appeared in his voice before.

“You must not blame her; indeed you must not! it was entirely my fault. I am awfully sorry that you were alarmed, but indeed there was no cause. What did you

think had happened? Did you think"—with an excited laugh of triumph and a bright blush—"that I had run off with her?"

The speech is in extremely bad taste, since, whatever may be the posture of affairs between himself and Elizabeth, it is morally impossible that her mother can yet be enlightened as to it; the familiarity of it is therefore premature and the jocosity ill-placed. No one can be more disposed to judge it severely than its unintended auditor; but even he is startled by the effect it produces.

Without making the smallest attempt at an answer, Mrs. Le Marchant instantly turns her shoulder upon the young man—a snub of which Jim would have thought so gentle-mannered a person quite incapable, and walks away from him with so determined an air that not even a person in the seventh heaven of drunkenness can mistake her meaning. Nor does Elizabeth's conduct offer him any indemnification. She follows her mother a little more slowly;

and, as she passes Jim, he sees that she is shaking violently, and that her face is as white as chalk. A sort of generous indignation against the mother for spoiling the poor little soul's first moments of bliss mixes curiously in his mind, with a less noble satisfaction at the reflection that there are undoubtedly breakers ahead of Byng.

"How—how are we to divide?" cries Cecilia, as they all stand at the door while the two carriages drive up.

No one answers. The arrangement seems planned by no one in particular, and yet, as he drives down the hill, Burgoyne finds himself sitting opposite the two Misses Wilson. He is thankful that the raised hood and unfurled umbrellas of the second equipage prevent his having any ocular evidence of the ecstasy that that wet leather and that dripping silk veil. But even this consolation is not long left him. As they leave the fir-wood, they come out of the clouds too, into clear, lower air. Hoods are pushed back and

umbrellas shut. The horses, in good heart, with homeward-turned heads, pricked with emulation by another carriage ahead of them, trot cheerfully down the road—the road with all its bent-elbow turnings—down, down, into the valley beneath. But the clouds that have rolled away off the evening sky seem to have settled down with double density upon the spirit of Burgoyne and his companions. Even the fountain of Cecilia's chatter is dried. Once she says suddenly *à propos de bottes* :

“She must be years older than he!”
To which Amelia quickly rejoins—

“But she does not look it.”

It is almost the only remark she makes during the long drive, and Burgoyne is thankful to her for her silence. Conscious of and grateful for her magnanimity as he is, there is yet something that jars upon him in her intuition of his thoughts, and in her eager championship of that other woman. He looks out blankly at the flowers, wetly smiling from field and bank, at the endless garden of embracing vines

and embraced mulberries, joining their young leafage ; at the stealing river and the verdurous hill-sides. In vain for him Italy's spring laughter broadens across the eternal youth of her face.

On reaching Florence and the Anglo-Américain, he would fain enter and spend the evening with his betrothed. He has a feverish horror of being left alone with his own thoughts, but she gently forbids him.

"It would not be fair upon father and Sybilla," she says. "I am afraid they have not been getting on very well *tête-à-tête* together all this wet day, and I should not be much good to you in any case. I feel stupid. You will say"—smiling—"that there is nothing very new in that ; but I am quite beyond even my usual mark to-night. Good-night, dear ; I humbly beg your pardon for having caused you to spend such a wretched day. I will never give you another treat—never, *never* ! it was my first and last attempt."

She turns from him dejectedly, and he is himself too dejected to attempt any

reassuring falsities. She would not have believed him if he had told her that it had not been a wretched day to him, and the publicity of their place of parting forbids him to administer even the silent consolation of a kiss. And yet he feels a sort of remorse at having said nothing, as the door closes upon her depressed back. Backs can look quite as depressed as faces. The lateness of their start home has thrown their return late. Burgoyne reflects that he may as well dine at once, and then trudge through his solitary evening as best he may. Heaven knows at what hour Byng may return. Shall he await his coming, and so get over the announcement of his bliss to-night, or put the dark hours between himself and it?

He decides in favour of getting it over to-night, up to whatever small hour he may be obliged to attend his friend's arrival. But he has not to wait nearly so long as he expects. He has not to wait at all, hardly. Before he has left his own room, while he is still making such

toilette for his own company as self-respect requires, the person whom he had not thought to behold for another four or five hours enters—enters with head held high, with joy-tinged, smooth cheeks, and with a superb lamp of love and triumph lit in each young eye. A passing movement of involuntary admiration traverses the other's heart as he looks at him. This is how the human animal ought to—was originally intended to—look! How very far the average specimen has departed from the type! There is not much trace of admiration, however, in the tone which he employs for his one brief word of interrogation :

“Already?”

“I was sent away,” replies Byng, in a voice whose intoxication pierces even through the first four small words; “they sent me away—they would not let me go further than the house-door. I say ‘they,’ but of course *she* had no hand in it—*she*, not *she*. *She* would not have sent me away, God bless her! it was her mother,

of course—how could she have had the heart?"

Burgoyne would no doubt have made some answer in time; though the "she," the implication of Elizabeth's willingness for an indefinite amount of her lover's company, the "God bless her," give him a sense of choking.

"But I do not blame Mrs. Le Marchant," pursues Byng, in a rapt, half-absent key. "Who would not wish to monopolize her? Who would not grudge the earth leave to kiss her sweet foot?"

"All I can is nothing

To her whose worth makes other worthies nothing.
She is alone!"

"That at least is not your fault," replies Burgoyne drily; "you have done your best to avert that catastrophe."

But to speak to the young man now is of as much avail as to address questions or remonstrances to one walking in his sleep.

"If she had allowed me, I would have lain on her threshold all night; I would

have been the first thing that her heavenly eye lit on ; I would——”

But Burgoyne’s phial of patience is for the present emptied to the dregs.

“ You would have made a very great fool of yourself, I have not the least doubt. Why try to persuade a person of what he is already fully convinced ? But as Miss Le Marchant happily did not wish for you as a doormat, perhaps it is hardly worth while telling me what you would have done if she had.”

The sarcastic words, ill-natured and unsympathetic as they sound in their own speaker’s ears, yet avail to bring the young dreamer but a very few steps lower down his ladder of bliss.

“ I beg your pardon,” he says sweet-temperedly ; “ I suppose I am a hideous bore to-night ; I suppose one must always be a bore to other people when one is tremendously happy.”

“ It is not your being tremendously happy that I quarrel with,” growls Burgoyne, struggling to conquer, or at least

tone down, the intense irritability of nerves that his friend's flights provoke. "You are perfectly right to be that if you can manage to compass it; but what I should be glad to arrive at is your particular ground for it in the present case."

The question, sobering in its tendency, has yet for sole effect the setting Byng off again with spread pinions into the empyrean.

"What particular ground I have?" he repeats, in a dreamy tone of ecstasy. "You ask what particular ground I have? Had ever anyone cause to be so royally happy as I?"

He pauses a moment or two, steeped in a rapture of oblivious reverie, then goes on, still as one only half waked from a beatific vision :

"I had a prognostic that to-day would be the culminating day—something told me that to-day would be the day; and when you gave me up your seat in her carriage—how could you be so magnificently generous? How can I ever adequately show you my gratitude?"

“ Yes, yes ; never mind that.”

“ Then, later on, in the wood ”—his voice sinking, as that of one who approaches a Holy of Holies—“ when that blessed mist wrapped her round, wrapped her lovely body round, so that I was able to withdraw her from you, so that you did not perceive that she was gone—were not you really aware of it ? Did not it seem to you as if the light had gone out of the day ? When we stood under those dripping trees, as much alone as if——”

“ I do not think that there is any need to go into those details,” interrupts Burgoyne, in a hard voice ; “ I imagine that in these cases history repeats itself with very trifling variations ; what I should be glad if you would tell me is, whether I am to understand that you have to-day asked Miss Le Marchant to marry you ?”

Byng brings his eyes, which have been lifted in a sort of trance to the ceiling, down to the prosaic level of his Mentor’s severe and tight-lipped face.

“ When you put it in that way,” he says,

in an awed half-whisper, "it does seem an inconceivable audacity on my part that I, who but a few days ago was crawling at her feet, should dare to-day to reach up to the heaven of her love."

Burgoyne had known perfectly well that it was coming ; but yet how much worse is it than he had expected !

"Then you *did* ask her to marry you?"

But Byng has apparently fled back on the wings of fantasy into the wet woods of Vallombrosa, for he makes no verbal answer.

"She said yes?" asks Burgoyne, raising his voice, as if he were addressing someone deaf. "Am I to understand that she said yes?"

At the sound of that hard naked query the dreamer comes out of his enchanted forest again.

"I do not know what she said ; I do not think she said anything," he answers, murmuring the words laggingly ; while, as he goes on, the fire of his madness spires high in his flashing eyes. "We have got beyond speech, she and I ! We have

reached that region where hearts and intelligences meet without the need of those vulgar go-betweens—words.”

There is a moment's pause, broken only by the commonplace sound of an electric bell rung by some inmate of the hotel.

“And has Mrs. Le Marchant reached that region too?” inquires Jim presently, with an irony he cannot restrain. “Does she too understand without words, or have you been obliged, in her case, to employ those vulgar go-betweens?”

“She *must* understand—she *does*—undoubtedly she does!” cries Byng, whose drunkenness shares with the more ordinary kind the peculiarity of believing whatever he wishes to be not only probable but inevitable. “Who could see us together and be in uncertainty for a moment? And her mother has some of her fine instincts, her delicate intuitions; not, of course, to the miraculous extent that *she* possesses them. In *her* they amount to genius!”

“No doubt, no doubt; but did you trust

entirely to Mrs. Le Marchant's instincts, or did you broach the subject to her at all? You must have had time, plenty of time, during that long drive home."

"Well, no," answers Byng slowly, and with a slight diminution of radiance. "I meant to have approached it; I tried to do so once or twice; but I thought, I fancied—probably it was only fancy—that she wished to avoid it."

"To avoid it?"

"Oh, not in any offensive, obvious way; it was probably only in my imagination that she shirked it at all—and I did not make any great efforts. It was all so perfect"—the intoxication getting the upper hand again—"driving along in that balmy flood of evening radiance—did you see how even the tardy sun came out for us?—with that divine face opposite to me! Such a little face!"—his voice breaking into a tremor—"Is not it inconceivable, Jim, how so much beauty can be packed into so tiny a compass?"

Burgoyne has all the time had his

brushes in his hand, the brushes with which he has been preparing himself for his solitary dinner. He bangs them down now on the table. How can he put a period to the ravings of this maniac? And yet not so maniac either. What gives the sharpest point to his present suffering is the consciousness that he would have made quite as good a maniac himself if he had had the chance. This consciousness instils a few drops of angry patience into his voice, as, disregarding the other's high-flown question, he puts one that is not at all high-flown himself.

"Then you have not told Mrs. Le Marchant yet?"

But the smile that the memory—so fresh, only half an hour old—of Elizabeth's loveliness has laid upon Byng's lips still lingers there; and makes his response dreamy and vague.

"No, not yet; not yet! *She* had taken one of her gloves off; her little hand lay, palm upward, on her knees almost all the way; once or twice I thought of taking it,

of taking possession of it, of telling her mother in that way; but I did not. It seemed—out in the sunshine, no longer in the sacred mist of that blessed wood—too high an audacity, and I did not!”

He stops, his words dying away into a whisper, his throat's too narrow passage choked by the rushing ocean of his immense felicity.

Burgoyne looks at him in silence, again with a sort of admiration mixed with wrath. How has this commonplace, pink-and-white boy managed to scale such an altitude, while he himself, in all his life, though with a better intelligence, and, as he had thought, with a deeper heart, had but prowled around the foot? Why should he try to drag him down? On the peak of that great Jungfrau of rapture no human foot can long stand.

“As I told you, Mrs. Le Marchant turned me away from their door,” pursues Byng. “It struck me—I could not pay much attention to the fact, for was not I bidding *her* good-night—taking farewell of

those heavenly eyes?—did you ever see such astonishing eyes?—for four colossal hours—but it struck me that her mother's manner was a little colder to me than it usually is. It had been a little cold all day—at least, so I fancied. Had the same idea occurred to you?”

Burgoyne hesitates.

“But even if it were so,” continues Byng, his sun breaking out again in full brilliancy from the very little cloud that, during his last sentence or two, had dimmed its lustre, “how can I blame her? Does one throw oneself into the arms of the burglar who has broken open one's safe and stolen one's diamonds?”

Burgoyne still hesitates. Shall he tell the young ranter before him what excellent reasons he has for knowing that any filial disposition on his part to throw himself on Mrs. Le Marchant's neck will be met by a very distinct resistance on that lady's part, or shall he leave him poised on

“The jag
Of his mountain crag”

till morning? The morning light will certainly see him tumbling at the least some few kilomètres down. He decides generously to leave him in present possession of his peak ; but yet, so inconsistent is human nature, his next speech can have no drift but that of giving a slight jog to his friend's towering confidence.

“ And your own mother ? ”

It may generally be concluded that a person has not a very pertinent response to give to a question if his only answer to that question be to repeat it in the same words.

“ My own mother ? ”

“ Yes ; you will write at once to tell her, I suppose ? ”

For a second the young man's forehead clouds, then he breaks into an excited laugh.

“ Tell her ? I should rather think I should ! Do you suppose that I shall lose a moment in telling everybody I know—everybody I ever heard of ? I want you to tell everybody too—every single soul of your acquaintance ! ”

“ I ? ”

“Tell Amelia ; tell Cecilia”—quite unaware, in his excitement, of the freedom he is taking, for the first time in his life, with those young ladies’ Christian names—“tell the other one—the sick one ; tell them all ! I want *her* to feel that all my friends, everybody I know, welcome her—hold out their arms to her. I want them all to tell her they are glad—you most of all, of course, old chap ; she will not think it is all right till you have given your consent !”—laughing again with that bubbling-over of superfluous joy—“Do you know—it seems incomprehensible now—but there was a moment when I was madly jealous of you ? I was telling *her* about it to-day ; we were laughing over it together in the wood.”

Burgoyne feels that one more mention of that wood will convert him into a lunatic, quite as indisputable as his companion, only very much more dangerous.

“Indeed !” he says grimly. “I should have thought you might have found a more interesting subject of conversation.”

“Perhaps I was not so very far out either”—possibly dimly perceiving, even through the golden haze of his own glory, the lack of enjoyment of his last piece of news conveyed by Jim’s tone—“for she has an immense opinion of you. I do not know anyone of whom she has so high an opinion ; she says you are so dependable.”

The adjective, as applied to himself by Elizabeth and her mother, has not the merit of novelty in the hearer’s ears, which is perhaps the reason why the elation that he must naturally feel on hearing it does not translate itself into words.

“So dependable,” repeats Byng, apparently pleased with the epithet. “She says you give her the idea of being a sort of rock ; you will come to-morrow, and wish her joy, will not you?”

“I am afraid that my wishing it her will not help her much to it,” answers Burgoyne, rather sadly ; “but I do not think you need much doubt that I do wish it. Joy”—repeating the word over reflectively—“it is a big thing to wish anyone.”

The extreme dampness of his tone arrests for a few minutes Byng's jubilant pæan.

"You do not think that my mother will be pleased with the news?" he asks presently, in a changed and hesitating key.

"I do not think about it; I know she will not!"

"I suppose not; and yet"—with an accent of stupefaction—"it is inconceivable that she, who has always shown such a tender sympathy for me in any paltry little bit of luck that has happened to me, should not rejoice with me when all heaven ope——"

"Yes, yes; of course."

"Do you think"—with a gleam of hope—"that my mother may have tried to dissuade me because she thought I was only laying up disappointment for myself—because she thought it so unlikely that *she* should deign to stoop to me?"

Burgoyne shakes his head.

"Perhaps," he says, with the slowness of a man who is saying what he himself does not believe, "a part of your mother's

dislike to the idea may be in the fact of Miss Le Marchant's being older than you."

"*Older!*" cries Byng, with almost a shout of angry derision at the suggestion. "What have creatures like *her* to do with age? I neither know nor care what her age is! If you know, do not tell me! I will not listen! Upon that exquisite body time and change are powerless to work their hideous metamorphoses!"

"Fiddlesticks!" replies Burgoyne gruffly. "If she live long enough, she will be an old woman, and will look like one, I suppose!" though, even as he speaks, he realizes that to him this is almost as incredible as to the young madman whom he is so pitilessly snubbing. "But, however that may be, I think you had better make up your mind to meeting the most resolved opposition on the part of your mother."

"I believe you are right," replies Byng, out of whose voice his kind Mentor has at last succeeded in momentarily conjuring the exaltation. "Her prejudice against

them, against *her*, always filled me with stupefaction. I never dared trust myself to discuss it with her; I was afraid that if I did I might be led into saying something to her, something I should be sorry for afterwards. Thank God, I have never spoken unkindly to her in all my life!"

"You would have been a sweep if you had!" interjects Jim.

"I never heard her give any reason for it, did you? It was as baseless as it was senseless." After a pause, his voice taking on again its inflection of confident, soaring triumph: "But it cannot last—it is absolutely beyond the wildest bounds of possibility that it can last! After five minutes' talk mother will be at her feet; I know my mother so well! Not one of her exquisite ways will be lost upon her, and *she* will do her very best to win her! Jim, I ask you—I put it to you quietly and plainly—I know you think I am mad, but I am not—I am speaking quite rationally and coolly—but I ask you—*you*, an impartial bystander—do you think that any

human being, anything made of flesh and blood, could resist *her*—*her* when she puts herself out to please—*her* at her very best?"

As Burgoyne is conscious of not being in a position to answer this question with much satisfaction to himself, he leaves it unanswered.





CHAPTER XXV.

“Some say the genius so
Cries come to him that instantly must die.”

A NEW day has awaked, and Firenze, fresh-washed after yesterday's rain, smelling through all her streets of lilies, laughs up, wistaria-hung, to a fleckless sky. If poor Amelia had but deferred her treat for twenty-four hours, what a different Vallombrosa would she and her companions have carried home in their memories! Amelia's treat!

“I shall not forget Amelia's treat in a hurry!” Burgoyne says to himself, as he sits appetiteless over his solitary breakfast. “I had better go and tell her the result of it.”

As he makes this reflection, he rises with some alacrity, and, leaving his scarcely-tasted coffee and his not-at-all-tasted omelette, walks out of the *salle-à-manger*. His motive for so early a visit to the Anglo-Américain is less an excessive eagerness to proclaim his piece of news than the thought that by so doing he will, at least for a few hours, escape the necessity of being in his young friend's company. As to where that young friend at present is, whether, after having wandered about the town all night, he is now sleeping late, or whether he is already off to persecute poor Mrs. Le Marchant for that maternal blessing which she has so little inclination to give, Jim is ignorant. All he knows is that such another dose of Byng's erotic eloquence as he had to swallow last night will leave him (Burgoyne) either a murderer or suicide.

Owing to his arrival at the Anglo-Américain so much sooner than usual, he finds himself coming in for the ceremony of Sybilla's installation for the day in the drawing-room. There is always a little

pomp and fussy bustle about this rite. Sybilla totters in (grave doubts have occasionally crossed the minds of her family as to whether she does not in reality possess a pair of excellent and thoroughly dependable legs), supported on one side by Amelia and on the other by her maid. Cecilia goes before with an air cushion, and Mr. Wilson follows, when he does not turn restive—which is sometimes the case—with a duvet. To-day, as I have said, this rite is in full celebration when Jim arrives, but it is being performed with mutilated glories. The rite is going forward, but the high priest is absent. That ministrant, upon whose arm the sufferer is wont to lean far the most heavily ; she upon whom devolves the whole responsibility of arranging the three cushions behind the long limp back ; the properly covering the languid feet ; the nice administering of the reviving cordial drops that are to repair the fatigue of the transit from bedroom to sitting-room—that most important and unfailing ministrant is nowhere to be seen. No artist

wishes his picture to be viewed in an inchoate, unfinished stage, nor is Sybilla at all anxious to have the public admitted to the sight of that eminent work of art herself until she is stretched in faint, moribund, graceful completeness on her day-bed. At the moment of Burgoyne's entry she has just reached that unbecoming point, where she is sitting sideways on her sofa, before her wasted limbs—Burgoyne is one of those heretics who have never believed that they are wasted—have been carefully lifted into their final posture of extension upon the Austrian blanket. It is, of all moments, the one at which interruption is least welcome; nor is the intruder at all surprised at being greeted by the invalid with a more than subacid accent.

“My dear Jim, *already!* Why you become more *matinale* every day! you *are* the early bird indeed! You do not”—with an annoyed laugh—“give us poor worms a chance of being beforehand with you.”

“I am very sorry if I am too soon,” replies he, his eyes wandering away from

the fretful features before him in search of others upon which he knows he shall find written no complaint of his prematurity — “but I came to—— Where’s Amelia?”

“You may well ask,” replies Sybilla, with a sort of hysterical laugh. “It is pretty evident that she is not *here*! My dear Cis, would you mind remembering that my head is not made of mahogany? you gave it such a bang with that cushion. I am very sorry to trouble you. The heaviest load a sick person has to bear is the feeling that she is such a burden to those around her; and certainly, my dear, you do not help me to forget it.”

“Where is she?” repeats Burgoyne hastily, both because he wants to know, and because he is anxious to strangle in its infancy one of those ignoble family bickerings, to assist at many of which has been the privilege or penalty of his state of intimacy.

“She is not well,” replies Cecilia shortly, her rosy face rosier than usual, either with the joy of imminent battle, or with the

exertion of swaddling, under protest, the invalid's now elevated legs.

"Not well! Amelia not well," echoes he, in a tone of incredulity.

During all the years of their acquaintance not once has he heard his patient sweetheart complain of ache or pain. Manlike, he has therefore concluded that she can never have felt either.

"It is very thoughtless of her," says Cecilia, with a not altogether amiable laugh, and giving a final irritated slap to Sybilla's coverlet—"considering how much illness we already have in the house; ha! ha! but it is true all the same: she is not well, not at all well; she is in bed."

"In bed!"

"She must have caught a chill yesterday on that disgusting excursion; driving home that long distance in wet shoes and stockings."

"But I thought, I hoped that—I asked her to change them."

"She had them dried in a sort of way; but I could see when she put them on

again that they were really wringing wet still. I told her so, but she only answered that even if they were, what matter? she never caught cold. You know that Amelia never thinks that anything matters that concerns herself."

This would be an even handsomer tribute to Amelia than it is, if it did not suggest a secondary intention of administering a back-hander to someone else.

"In the case of my children," says Mr. Wilson, making his voice heard for the first time from the window, where he is discontentedly peering up and down the sheets of a journal through his spectacles, "there seems to be no mean possible between senseless rashness and preposterous self-indulgence."

Mr. Wilson likes his eldest daughter. He is uneasy and upset, and rather angry at her indisposition, and this is his way of showing his paternal tenderness.

"In bed!"

The human animal is the most adaptive of created beings; but even it requires

some little time to adjust itself to entirely new conditions of existence.

“Amelia,” continues Mr. Wilson, fanning the flame of his ire with the bellows of his own rhetoric, “is the one among you whom I did credit with the possession of a head upon her shoulders, and now here she is wantonly laying herself up!”

“You talk as if she did it on purpose, father,” says Cecilia with an indignant laugh—“as if she enjoyed it. I do not think that anyone, even Sybilla”—with a resentful side-glance at the sofa—“could enjoy having her teeth chattering with cold, her head as heavy as lead, and her knees knocking together under her.”

“Good heavens!” cries Jim, his bewildered surprise swallowed up in genuine alarm; “you do not mean to say that she is as bad as that?”

Sybilla laughs, and even in the midst of his real anxiety, Burgoyne has time for the reflection that the Wilson family seem this morning to have *se donné le mot* to show in how many different styles it is

possible to be merry without the least tinge of genuine mirth in any.

“ My dear Jim, have not you known Cis long enough not to take her *au pied de la lettre*? Do not you know of old what a magnificent colourist she is?—a perfect Tintoret! Of course Amelia is not quite the thing, poor dear—she has no one but herself to blame for that!—but equally of course, to a colossally healthy person such as she, any little ailment appears a mountain.”

This speech is uttered with the accent of such entire conviction that it ought to carry reassurance into the heart of the person to whom it is addressed. Sybilla really and honestly disbelieves in the reality of any claims but her own to sincere sickness. But Jim unreasonably neither is nor feigns to be reassured.

“ You have had advice for her? You have sent for Dr. Coldstream?” he asks rapidly of the two sound members of the family, turning his back unceremoniously upon the invalid.

"I was going to send for him at once," answers Cecilia, her own latent anxiety quickened by the evident alarm of her interlocutor, "but Sybilla said it was needless, as in any case he was coming to see her this afternoon."

"I think he wishes to change my medicine," puts in Sybilla in a piano voice, that shows an evident desire to assert her threatened position of prime and only genuine invalid, a sort of "beware of imitations" tone; "he is not quite satisfied with the effect of the last, I think; it has not brought up the pulse and quickened the appetite in the way he hoped. I thought that he might run up and look at Amelia at the end of his visit to me."

"And is it possible," inquires Jim, with some heat, "that you are going to let half a day go by without doing anything for her? I suppose you have not exaggerated, have you?" turning with an earnest appeal in his eyes to Cecilia; "but in any case I am very sure that nothing short of being

really and gravely ill would have kept her in bed—she who is always waiting hand and foot upon us all, whom we all allow to spend her life in hewing wood and drawing water for us.”

“Send for Dr. Coldstream at once,” says Mr. Wilson irritably; “at once, I tell you; he is so very seldom out of the house that I have often thought of suggesting to him to take a room here; and now, on the only occasion on which he is really needed, he is not at hand.”

“If you will write the note,” says Jim, a shade relieved at having at last succeeded in rousing Amelia’s relations to prompt action, and feeling a feverish desire to be doing something, “I will take it at once; it will be the quickest way; I may catch him before he goes out and bring him back with me.”

“Do you really think it is necessary?” asks Sybilla, as Jim hustles Cecilia to her writing-table, and stands, nervously fidgeting beside her as she writes; “do you think, if it is only a common cold, as I

suspect, that it is quite fair to worry a man who is so run off his legs already? He will probably laugh in your face; still, if you are so set upon it, it is perhaps more satisfactory."

"You need not go into details—just a line—make haste!" cries Jim, hanging tiresomely over Cecilia, rather impeding her than the reverse by his impatience, and leaving entirely unnoticed Sybilla's observation, which indeed has been uttered more to preserve her own self-respect than with much hope that in the present wrong-headed state of mind of her family any member will pay much heed to it.

In five minutes more, Jim, with Cecilia's note in his pocket, is being borne rapidly in a fiacre through the sweet, gay streets. But, drive as rapidly as he may, he is not quick enough to intercept the popular English doctor, who, although, as his servant tantalizingly informs Jim, he is almost always at home at that hour, has, on this occasion, been sent for to an urgent case of sudden illness out of Florence, at

the village of Peretola. Jim has to content himself with the assurance that immediately on his return the note will be given him ; and with this unsatisfactory intelligence Mr. Burgoyne reappears at the Anglo-Américain. He finds the three persons whom he had left much as he had quitted them—uneasy, cross, and unemployed.

“It is all the fault of that odious expedition yesterday,” says Cecilia, harking back to her old cry. “Why we set out at all, I can’t imagine ; on such a day, it was madness, and——”

“It is not much use thinking of that now,” interrupts Burgoyne impatiently, and wincing at these philippics against his poor bride’s miserable treat as if they had been directed against herself.

“Well, it is an ill-wind that blows nobody any good,” pursues the young lady. “I suppose that two of us enjoyed it enough to make up for the wretchedness of the other four.”

Her large prominent eyes are fixed upon Jim as she speaks with a sort of knowing-

ness overlying their former lugubrious expression.

“Do you mean Mr. Byng and Miss Le Marchant?” inquires he, pronouncing both names with a laboured distinctness, while his voice sounds to himself loud and wooden. “You are perfectly right in your conjecture; no doubt they enjoyed themselves. Byng wished me to tell you that they are engaged to be married.”

If the essence of a good piece of news is to surprise, Jim can certainly not flatter himself that his comes under that head.

“It did not require a conjurer to prophesy that,” is Cecilia’s comment. “I never saw two people who troubled themselves less to disguise their feelings. I saw that they neither of them knew whether they were on their heads or on their heels, when they emerged dripping from that horrid pine wood. Dear me!” — with a good-sized sigh — “how smoothly things run for some people! how easily some of these affairs come off, without a hitch anywhere from beginning to end!”

She pauses, and it is plain to those acquainted with her heart history that her thoughts are coursing mournfully back to the all-along reluctant and ultimately entirely faithless clergyman who had last possessed her young affections.

“Without a hitch from beginning to end?” cries Jim hotly, jarred more than he would like to own to himself by this phrase. “How can you possibly tell? These are early days to assert that so dogmatically.

“‘There’s many a slip
’Twixt the cup and the lip.’”

“Do you mean to say that you think it will not come off?” asks Cecilia, a slightly pleasurable light coming into her eyes as she asks—not that she has any ill-will towards Elizabeth, nor any distinct design of her own upon Byng; but that there is something not absolutely disagreeable to her in the idea of his being still among the ranks of the possible.

“I am sure he would make a delightful

husband," puts in Sybilla, her praise given emphasis by her desire to employ it as a weapon of offence against one who is at present more deeply than usual in her black books ; " he has such gentle, feminine ways ; he comes into a room so quietly, and when he asks one how one is really listens for the answer."

" Perhaps you are right, and it will fall through," says Cecilia thoughtfully ; " many engagements do !" (sighing again). " She is a sweet, pretty creature, and looks as if butter would not melt in her mouth ; but she is evidently older than he."

" Jim will not allow that to be an objection," cries Sybilla, with a faint laugh, " will you, Jim ? How much older than you is Amelia ? I always forget."

" I never can help thinking that she has a history," resumes Cecilia, in a meditative voice, " and that Mr. Greenock knows it. If ever her name is mentioned he always begins to look wise, as if there were something that he was longing to tell one about her ; it is continually on the tip of his

tongue—some day it will tumble over the tip.”

“I do not think that there is any use in my staying all this while!” cries Jim, jumping up. “Dr. Coldstream cannot be here at soonest for another hour; and I do not think that we are, any of us, very good company for each other to day, so I will look in again later.”

He is out of the room and out of the hotel before his companions can take exception to his disappearance. For some time he walks along aimlessly, his mind a jumble of misery, and dull, remorseful anxiety about Amelia; intolerable comparisons between his own lot and his friend's; sharp knives of jealousy as often as—which is almost unintermittently—his imagination wings its cruel way to the Piazza d'Azeglio—through one opulent week, *his* Piazza. At this moment—this moment, while his own leaden feet are treading goalless the hot flags that for him lead nowhere—Byng is enthroned with *her* in the heaven of the mean little salon. He unconsciously shows

his teeth in a stern smile to the surprised passers-by. He had jeered Byng for his hyperboles, and now he is *out-hyperboling* him. What a detestable verb he has invented! He laughs out loud. Are they sitting at the window, looking out at the judas tree and the Paulownia? Not they! The window is commanded to a certain extent by the roadway. The window is for acquaintances, banal acquaintances, like himself—no place for the permitted freedoms of exquisite new love. Are they then on the sofa, the vulgar walnut sofa, over which Elizabeth has thrown her blue Neapolitan table cloth? It is a little sofa, scarcely room for two upon it, but, oh! plenty of room for them! Or are they at the piano? Is she singing him some sugared ditty “lovely well” until he breaks into her song with the storm of his kisses, and her little white hands drop from the keys, and they lie sobbing with ecstasy in each other’s arms? It is quite certain that Byng will sob. He is always delighted at having an opportunity for turning on the

water-works. Is there a bare possibility that Mrs. Le Marchant may carry her disapprobation to the pitch of impeding by her presence their *tête-à-tête*? The idea gives him a momentary alleviation. Why should not he go and see for himself whether it is so? It will be a method of passing the tedious interval before he can hear the doctor's verdict on Amelia. He must at some time or other comply with Byng's pressing prayer to him to offer his congratulations to Elizabeth, and he may as well have a day of complete and perfect pain—pain of various flavours and essences mixed into one consummate draught—a day of which not one hour shall be without its ache.

Having come to this conclusion, his aimless walk quickens, and changes into a purposeful striding through streets and Piazzas, till he finds himself standing at the door of 12*a*. He looks up at the *entresol* windows—they are all open, but no one is either sitting in or looking out at them. It is as he had thought. The window is too

public for them ; neither can they be at the piano, for not a sound of either voice or instrument is wafted down to him. He runs up the stone stairs, and rings the electric bell. The standing before the unopened portal, and the trembling jar of the bell, bring back to him with a vividness he could do without, those other long-ago days—they seem to him long ago—when he stood there last, with no easy heart even then, but yet with how different anticipations. He has found it hard enough to bear the brunt of Byng's furious inhuman joy when alone with him. How will he stand it when he sees them together ?

He is recalled from these reflections by the opening of the door, and the appearance in it of the ministering angel who has usually admitted him into his Eden—Annunziata. It strikes him that Annunziata looks older and more dishevelled than ever, and is without that benevolent smile of welcoming radiance which her hard-featured face generally wears. Nor does she, as has been her wont, stand back to let him

pass in almost before he has put his question, as if she could not admit him quickly enough. But to-day she stands, on the contrary, in the doorway without a smile. In a second the idea flashes across Jim's mind that Byng has forbidden anyone to be let in. It turns him half sick for the moment, and it is with an unsteady voice that he stammers :

“The Signora? The Signorina?”

Annunziata lifts her shoulders in a dismal shrug, and stretches out her hands :

“Gone!”

“*Gone?* You mean gone out driving?”

Then remembering that her English is as minus a quantity as his Italian, he adds in eager explanation, “*en fiacre?*”

She shakes her head, and then nods vaguely in the direction of the whole of the rest of the world—the whole, that is, that is not 12 bis.

“No, *gone!*”

“But *where?* *Dove?*” cries he, frantic with irritation at his own powerlessness either to understand or be understood.

Again she shakes her head.

“I do not know; they did not say.”

He gathers this to be her meaning, and hurriedly puts another query.

“When? *Quando?*”

But her answer being longer and more voluble, he can't take in its drift, seeing which she retreats a step, and, motioning him with her hand to enter, points down the passage. He does not require to have the dumb-show of invitation twice repeated, but, rushing past her, hurries down the well-known little corridor to the *salon* door. It is open, and he stands within. At the first glance it seems to him to wear much its usual air. There is even a score of music standing on the piano, the copper pots are full of rose-branches, and the *scaldini* brimming with Firenze's own lilies, the bit of red Venetian brocade, with the little old tinsel fringe, still hangs over the arm-chair by the fireplace, and the blue Neapolitan table-cover still disguises the vulgarity of the sofa. He has misunderstood Annunziata—it is really monstrous to be so help-

lessly ignorant of the language of the country you are living in—or she has lost her wits, or—— He had thought the room empty, but as he advances a step further into it, he discovers that he is not the sole occupant : that lying stretched upon the floor, with his fair head buried in a little pillow, against which both men have often seen Elizabeth's small white cheek resting, is Byng !—the Byng whose riotous, insolent happiness he had doubted his own powers of witnessing without murdering him !—the splendid felicity of whose lot he has been so bitterly laying beside his own destiny—the Byng whom he had been gnashing his teeth at the thought of—at the thought of him lying in Elizabeth's arms !





CHAPTER XXVI.

“Cressid, I love thee in so strained a purity,
That the blest gods—as angry at my fancy,
More bright in zeal than the devotion which
Cold lips blow to their deities—take thee from me.”

“WHAT does this mean?”

The question has to be twice repeated before the person to whom it is addressed gives any sign of having heard it. His ears must be so deeply embedded in the pillow that the passage to his hearing is blocked. It is not till the interrogation is put a second time, in a louder key, and accompanied by a not very gentle shake of the shoulder, that he at length looks up, and reveals what Jim knows to be, and

yet has some difficulty in recognising, as the features of Byng—features so altered, so distorted, so swollen by excessive weeping, that no one less intimately acquainted with them than the person who has been already contemplating them, under the influence of a variety of circumstances for a couple of months, could possibly put the owner's name to them. Jim has expected that his young friend would spend some portion of this day in crying, knowing well both his powers of, and his taste for, "turning on the water-works," as he but lately cruelly and uncivilly phrased it to his own mind. But the warm tears of emotion, few and undisfiguring, with which he had credited him, have not much kinship with the scalding torrents that have made his handsome young eyes mere red blurs on his ashen face, that have furrowed his cheeks, and damped his disordered curls, and taken all the starch out of his immaculate "masher" collar. They have wetted, too, into a state of almost pulp, a crumpled sheet of

note-paper, which his head seems to have been burrowing in, upon the pillow.

“What does it mean?” repeats Burgoyne, for the third time, a hideous fear assailing him, at the sight of the young man’s anguish, that he himself may have mistaken Annunziata’s meaning ; that her “gone” may have stood for the final one ; that some instant stroke may have snatched lovely Elizabeth away, out of the world. Surely no catastrophe less than death can account for such a metamorphosis as that wrought in Byng. “Why do you look like that?” he goes on, his voice taking that accent of rage which extreme fear sometimes gives. “Why do not you speak?”

The other, thus abjured, plainly makes a violent effort for articulation ; but his dry throat will let pass nothing but a senseless sob.

“What does that paper mean?” goes on Burgoyne, realizing the impotence of his friend to obey his behest, and rendered doubly terrified by it ; “what is it ? what

does it say? Does it—does it—explain anything?”

He points as he speaks to the blurred and rumpled *billet*, and Byng catches it up convulsively, and thrusts it into his hand.

“It is the first letter I ever had from her,” he says, the words rushing out broken and scarcely intelligible upon a storm of sobs, and so flings his head violently down upon the floor again in a new access of furious weeping.

Burgoyne holds the paper in his fingers, but for a moment or two he is unable to read it. There is an ugly swimming before his eyes for one thing; for another, Byng’s treatment has not improved it as a specimen of caligraphy; but it never in its best days could have been a very legible document. And yet it is not long. Its few words, when at length he makes them out, ran thus:

“Good-bye, I was mad yesterday. I shall never marry you; I have no right to marry anyone. For God’s sake do not

ask me what I mean ; and oh ! don't, don't, DON'T come after me !"

There is neither date nor signature. As Jim stands staring at the five crooked, straggling sentences, a great swelling compassion fills his heart. Did ever poor little scribble make it so easy to construct the small shaking hand, and the tender breaking heart that penned it ? An immense pity fills his soul ; yet does it quite fill it ? Is there room besides, in one corner, for a small pinch of devilish joy ?

"There's many a slip

"Twixt the cup and the lip."

His own words of ill-natured croaking, uttered not an hour ago, to Cecilia Wilson, recur to his mind. How little he thought that that prophecy would so soon be fulfilled. He remains so long motionless and silent, his fingers still holding the paper, whose contents he has long ago mastered, that Byng—the violence of his paroxysm of grief at length exhausted—struggles to his feet and speaks—speaks as well as the

catch in his sobbing breath and his quivering lips will let him.

“It is not her doing! You may think it is her doing, but I know it is not! I know her better than you do.”

“I never made any pretensions to knowing her well,” replies the other sadly, and relinquishing as he speaks the note to its owner.

“Is it likely, I ask you? cries Byng excitedly. “I put it to you fairly: is it likely that she, with her seraph nature, all love and burning, she that is tender over drowning flies, would have put me to this horrible pain?—O God, you do not know what pain it is!” [“Do not I?” aside]—“of her own free will?”

“I do not know; as you say, I do not know her well.”

“Then tell, oh tell! how thou didst murder me?”

says Byng, beginning to walk up and down the room with the tears still rolling down his cheeks, but in his spouting voice—a voice which at once assures Jim of an

amelioration in his friend's condition, and hardens his heart against him. As a broad rule, indeed, it may be laid down that that sorrow which courses through one of the numberless channels cut by the poets for it will not bring its owner to Waterloo Bridge.

"But what am I saying?" lapsing out of his quotation into broken-hearted prose again. "It was not she! If I thought it were she, could I live a moment? It is her mother; no sane person can doubt that it is her mother's doing! She was always so sweetly docile, and her mother has conceived some prejudice against me. Did not I tell you how barbarously she shut the door upon me last night?—shut the door of my heaven in my face just as I thought I had won the right to enter it. Who would not have thought that it was won who had seen us together in the wood?"

Jim writhes.

"Oh, never mind the wood now!"

"Someone has prejudiced her against me, but who? I did not know that I had an enemy in the world. Someone has

told her about—about Oxford—about my being sent down.”

Jim is silent.

“If it is only that——” a tearful buoyancy beginning to pierce through his despair.

“It is not that.”

“Someone has put a spoke in my wheel; but who? You are the only person who could, and you, dear old chap, are the last person who would, though you were not very encouraging to me last night! *You* did not?”

There is so direct an interrogation in the last words, accompanied by so confiding a look of affection, that yet has an uneasy touch of doubt in it, that Jim is obliged to answer.

“No, I did not put a spoke in your wheel; but”—his honesty forcing the admission—“I am not at all so sure that I am the last person who would have done so, if I could.”

Byng has wiped his eyes to clear his vision of the blinding tears, and has again directed them to the note, which he has all

this while been alternately pressing against his heart, laying upon his forehead, and crushing against his mouth.

“It seems blasphemy to say so of anything that came from her hand,” he says, poring for the hundredth time over each obscure word, “but it reads like nonsense, does not it? ‘*I shall never marry you! I have no right to marry anyone!*’ No right? what does she mean?”

Jim shakes his head sadly.

“How can I tell?”

“Do you think it is possible”—lifting his disfigured eyes in horrified appeal to his friend—“it is a dreadful hypothesis, but I can think of no other—that that bright intelligence was clouded—that—that her dear little wits were touched when she wrote this?”

“No, I do not think so.”

“You—you are not keeping anything from me?”—coming a step nearer, and convulsively clutching his friend’s arm—“you—you do not know anything—anything that could throw light upon—upon

this? I do not know whether you are conscious of it, but there is something in your manner that might lead me to that conclusion. Do you know—have you heard anything?”

“I know nothing,” replies Jim slowly, and looking uncomfortably away from the questioner, “but I conjecture, I fear, I believe that—that——”

“That what? For God’s sake, be a little quicker!”

“That—that—there is a—a—something in her past.”

Byng falls back a pace or two, and puts up his hand to his head.

“What—what do you mean? What are you talking about? Her past? What”—soaring into extravagance again—“what can there be written on that white page?—so white that it bedazzles the eyes of even the angels who read it.”

“I do not know what there is,” replies Jim miserably, irritated almost beyond endurance by this poetic flight, and rendered even more wretched than he

was before by the *rôle* that seems to be forced upon him, of conjecturally blackening Elizabeth's character. "How many times must I tell you that I *know* no more than you, only from—from various indications I have been led to believe that she has *something*—some great sorrow behind her?"

There is a silence, and when it is broken it is infringed by what is not much more than a whisper.

"What—what do you mean; what—what sort of a sorrow?"

"I tell you, I do not know."

Byng's tears have stopped flowing, and he now lifts his eyes, full of a madness of exaltation, to the ceiling.

"I will go to her," he cries; "if sorrow has the audacity to approach her again, it will have to reckon with me. There is no sorrow, none, in the whole long gamut of woe, for which love such as mine is not a balm. Reciprocal love!"—trailing the words in a sort of slow rapture—"no one that had seen her in the wood could have doubted that it *was* reciprocal."

“No doubt, no doubt.”

“I will go to her!”—clasping his hands high in the air—“I will pour the oil and spikenard of my adoration into her gaping wounds! I will kiss the rifts together, though they yawn as wide as hell—yes, I will.”

“For heaven’s sake, do not talk such dreadful gibberish,” breaks in Jim, at length at the end of his patience, which had run quite to the extreme of its tether indeed at the last mention of that ever-recurring word. “It *is* a knockdown blow for you, I own, and I would do what I could to help you; but if you will keep on spouting and talking such terrible bosh——”

“I suppose I am making an ass of myself,” replies Byng, thus brought down with a run from his heroics. “I beg your pardon, I am sure, old man. I have no right to victimize you,” his sweet nature asserting itself even at this bitter moment; “but you see it is so horribly sudden. If you had seen her when I parted from her

last night at the door! She lingered a moment behind Mrs. Le Marchant—just a moment, just time enough to give me one look, one wordless look. She did not speak; she was so divinely dutiful and submissive that nothing would have persuaded her by the lightest word to imply any censure of her mother; but she gave me just a look, which said plainly, ‘It is not *my* fault that you are turned away! I would have welcomed you in!’ Upon that look I banqueted in heaven all night.”

He stops, choked.

“Well?”

“And then this morning, when I got here—I think I ran all the way; I am sure I did, for I saw people staring at me as I passed—to be met by Annunziata with the news that they were *gone*! I did not believe her; I laughed in her face, and then she grew angry, and bid me come in and see for myself! And I rushed past her, in here, with my arms stretched out, confident that in one short moment more *she* would be filling them, and instead of

her"—dropping upon his knees by the table with a groan—"I find this!"—dashing the note upon the floor—"all that she leaves me to fill my embrace instead of her is this poor little pillow, that still seems to keep a faint trace of the perfume of her delicate head!"

He buries his own in it again as he speaks, beginning afresh to sob loudly.

Jim stands beside him, his mind half full of compassion and half of a burning exasperation, and his body wholly rigid.

"When did they go? at what hour? last night or this morning?"

"This morning early, quite early."

"They have left all their things behind them"—looking round at the room, strewn with the traces of recent and refined occupation.

"Yes"—lifting his wet face out of his cushion—"and at first, seeing everything just as usual, even to her very work-basket—she has left her very work-basket behind—I was quite reassured. I felt certain

that they could have gone for only a few hours—for the day perhaps ; but——”

He breaks off.

“ Yes ? ”

“ They left word that their things were to be packed and sent after them to an address they would give.”

“ And you do not know where they have gone ? ”

“ I know nothing, nothing, only that they are gone.

“ ‘ Then tell, oh tell ! how thou didst murder me ? ’

Oh ! oh !! oh !!! ”

“ You never heard them speak of their plans, mention any place they intended to move to on leaving Florence ? ”

“ Never ! ”

“ It is too late for Rome,” says Jim musingly ; “ England ? I hardly think England,” recalling Elizabeth’s forlorn admission made to him at Monte Senario, “ Why should we go home, we have nothing pleasant to go to ? ”

“ I do not think they had any plans,”

says Byng, speaking in a voice which is thick with much weeping ; “ they never seemed to me to have any. She was so happy here, so gay, there never was anything more lovely than her gaiety, except—except—her tenderness.”

“ Yes, yes, no doubt. Then you are absolutely without a clue ? ”

“ Absolutely.”

“ Do you mean to say that up to yesterday—all through yesterday, even—she never gave you a hint of any intention of leaving Florence ? ”

“ Never, *never*. On the contrary, in the——” (he is going to say “ the wood,” but thinks better of it), “ we were planning many more such expeditions as yesterday’s. At least, I was planning them.”

“ And she assented ? ”

“ She did not *dissent*. She met me with a look of divine acquiescence.”

Jim turns away his head. He is involuntarily picturing to himself what that look was like, and with what sweet dumb-show it was accompanied.

“What powers of hell”—banging his head down upon the table again—“could have wrought such a hideous change in so few hours? Only ten! for it was eight in the evening before I left them, and they were off at six this morning. They could have seen no one; they had received no letters, no telegrams, for I inquired of Annunziata, and she assured me that they had not. Oh no!”—lifting his face with a gleam of moist hope upon it—“there is only one tenable hypothesis about it—it is not *her* doing at all. She wrote this under pressure. It is her handwriting, is it not?—though I would not swear even to that. I—I have played the mischief with my eyes”—pulling out his drenched pocket-handkerchief, and hastily wiping them—“so that I cannot see properly; but it *is* hers, is not it?”

“I do not know, I never saw her handwriting; she never wrote to me.”

“It was evidently dictated to her,” cries Byng, his sanguine nature taking an upward spring again; “there are clear traces,

even in the very way the letters are formed, of its being written to order reluctantly. She did it under protest. See how her poor little hand was shaking, and she was crying all the while, bless her ! There, do not you see a blister on the paper—here on this side ?”

Burgoyne does not see any blister, but as he thinks it extremely probable that there was one, he does not think himself called upon to wound his friend by saying so.

“ I declare I think we have got hold of the right clue at last,” cries Byng, his dimmed eyes emitting such a flash as would have seemed impossible to them five minutes ago. “ Read in this light, it is not nearly so incomprehensible : ‘ *I shall never marry you ; I have no right to marry anyone.*’ Of course, I see now ! What an ass I was not to see it at once ! What she means is that she has no right to leave her mother ! To anyone who knew her lofty sense of duty as well as I ought to have done it is quite obvious that

that is what she means. Is not it quite obvious? is not it as clear as the sun in heaven?"

Jim shakes his head.

"I am afraid that it is rather a forced interpretation."

"I do not agree with you," rejoins the other hotly; "I see nothing forced about it. You do not know as well as I do—how should you?—her power of delicate, self-sacrificing devotion. It is overstrained, I grant you; but there it is—she thinks she has no right to leave her mother now that she is all alone."

"She is not alone, she has her husband."

"I mean now that all her other children are married and scattered. There are plenty more—are not there?—though I never could get her to talk about them."

"There are two sisters and two brothers."

"But they are no longer any good to their mother," persists Byng, clinging to his theory with all the greater tenacity as he sees that it meets with no very

great acceptance in his friend's eyes ; "as far as she is concerned they are non-existent."

"I do not know what right you have to say that."

"And so she, with her lofty idea of self-sacrifice, immolates her own happiness on the altar of her filial affection. It is just like her!"—going off into a sort of rapture—"blind mole that I was not to divine the motive, which her ineffable delicacy forbade her to put into words. She thought she had a right to think that I should have comprehended her without words!"

He has talked himself into a condition of such exalted confidence before he reaches the end of this sentence that Jim is conscious of a certain brutality in applying to him the douche contained in his next words.

"I do not know why you should credit Mrs. Le Marchant with such colossal selfishness ; she never used to be a selfish woman,"

But Burgoyne's cold shower-bath does not appear even to damp the shoulders for which it is intended.

“‘Since you left me, taking no farewell,’”

murmurs Byng, beginning again to ramp up and down the little room, with head thrown back and clasped hands high lifted; and in his rapt poet voice :

“‘Since you left me, taking no farewell,’

I must follow you, sweet ! Despite your prohibition, I must follow you.

“‘We two that with so many thousand sighs,
Did buy each other.’”

Then, coming abruptly down to prose—
“Though they left no address, it will of course be possible, easy, to trace them. I will go to the station and make inquiries. They will have been seen. It is out of the question that she can have passed unnoticed! No eye that has once been enriched by the sight of her can have forgotten that heavenly vision. I will telegraph to

Bologna, to Milan, to Venice. Before night I shall have learnt her whereabouts. I shall be in the train, following her track. I shall be less than a day behind her. I shall fall at her feet, I shall——”

“You are talking nonsense,” answers Burgoyne impatiently ; and yet with a distinct shade of pity in his voice ; “you cannot do anything of the kind. When the poor woman has given so very unequivocal a proof of her wish to avoid you, as is implied in leaving the place at a moment’s notice, without giving herself even time to pack her clothes, it is impossible that you can force your company again upon her—it would be persecution.”

“And do you mean to tell me,” asks Byng slowly, and breathing hard, while the fanatical light dies out of his face, and leaves it chalk white ; “do you mean to say that I am to acquiesce, to sit down with my hands before me, and submit without a struggle, to the loss of—— O my God” —breaking out into an exceeding bitter cry —“why did you make me

“‘so rich in having such a jewel,
As twenty seas, if all their sands were pearl,
The water nectar, and the rocks pure gold,’

if it were only to rob me of her?”

“I do not see what other course is open to you,” replies Jim, answering only the first part of the young sufferer’s appeal, and ignoring the rhetoric, terribly genuine as is the feeling of which it is the florid expression. “It is evident that she has some cogent reasons—or at least that appear cogent to her—for breaking off her relations with you.”

“What cogent reasons can she have that she had not yesterday?” says Byng violently —“yesterday, when she lay in my arms, and her lips spoke their acquiescence in my worship—if not in words, yet oh, far, far more——”

“Why do you reiterate these assertions?” cries Burgoyne sternly, since to him there seems a certain indecency in—even in the insanity of loss—dragging to the eye of day the record of such sacred endearments. “I neither express nor feel any doubt as to

the terms you were on *yesterday*; what I maintain is that *to-day*—I do not pretend to explain the why—she has changed her mind; it is not”—with a sarcasm, which he himself at the very moment of uttering it feels to be cheap and unworthy—“it is not the first time in the world’s history that such a thing has happened. She has changed her mind.”

“I do not believe it,” cries Byng, his voice rising almost to a shout in the energy of his negation; “till her own mouth tell me so I will never believe it. If I thought for a moment that it was true I should rush to death to deliver me from the intolerable agony of such a thought. You do not believe it yourself”—lifting his spoilt sunk eyes in an appeal that is full of pathos to his friend’s harsh face. “Think what condemnation it implies of her—her whom you always affected to like, who thought so greatly of you—her whose old friend you were—her whom you knew in her lovely childhood!”

“You are right,” replies Jim, looking

down, moved, and ashamed ; “ I do not believe that she has changed her mind. What I do believe is that yesterday she let herself go ; she gave way for one day, only for one day, after all, poor soul, to that famine for happiness which, I suppose ”—with a sigh and a shrug—“ gnaws us all now and then—gave way to it even to the pitch of forgetting that—that something in her past of whose nature I am as ignorant as you are, which seems to cast a blight over all her life.”

He pauses ; but as his listener only hangs silently on his utterance he goes on :

“ After you left her, recollection came back to her ; and because she could not trust herself again with you, probably for the very reason that she cared exceedingly about you ”—steeling himself to make the admission—“ she felt that there was nothing for it but to go.”

Either the increased kindness of his friend's tone, or the conviction that there is, at least, something of truth in his explanations, lets loose again the fountain of

Byng's tears, and once more he throws his head down upon his hands and cries extravagantly.

"It is an awful facer for you, I know," says Burgoyne, standing over him, and, though perfectly dry-eyed, yet probably not very much less miserable than the young mourner, whose loud weeping fills him with an almost unbearable and yet compunctious exasperation.

"What is he made of? how can he do it?" are the questions that he keeps irefully putting to himself; and for fear lest in an access of uncontrollable irritation he shall ask them out loud, he moves to the door. At the slight noise he makes in opening it Byng lifts his head.

"Are you going?"

"Yes; if it is any consolation to you, you have not a monopoly of wretchedness to-day. Things are not looking very bright for me either. Amelia is ill."

"Amelia," repeats the other, with a hazy look, as if not at first able to call to mind who Amelia is; then, with a return of con-

sciousness, "Is Amelia ill? Oh poor Amelia. Amelia was very good to her. Amelia tried to draw her out. She liked Amelia!"

"Well"—with an impatient sigh—"unfortunately that did not hinder Amelia from falling ill."

"She is not ill *really*?"—his inborn kind-heartedness struggling for a moment to make head against the selfishness of his absorption!

"I do not know"—uneasily—"I am going back to the hotel to hear the doctor's verdict. Will you walk as far as to the Anglo-Américain with me? There is no use in your staying here."

But at this proposition the lover's sobs break out louder and more infuriating than ever.

"I will stay here till I die—till I am carried over the threshold that her cruel feet have crossed.

"Then tell, oh tell! how thou didst murder me."

Against a resolution at once so fixed and so rational, Jim sees that it is useless to contend.



CHAPTER XXVII.

THE sun rides high, as Burgoyne issues into the open air, and beats, blinding hot, upon the great stone flags that pave the Florentine streets, and seem to have a peculiar power of absorbing and retaining light and heat. He must have been longer in the Piazza d' Azeglio than he had thought, and the reflection quickens his step as he hurries, regardless of the midsummer blaze—for, indeed, it is more than equivalent to that of our midsummer—back to the Anglo-Américain. As he reaches it, he hears, with annoyance, the hotel clocks striking one. He is annoyed, both because the length of his absence seems to argue an indifference to the

tidings he is expecting, and also because he knows that it is the Wilsons' luncheon hour, and that he will probably find that they have migrated to the *salle-à-manger*. In this case he will have to choose between the two equally disagreeable alternatives of following and watching them at their food, or that of undergoing a *tête-à-tête* with Sybilla, who, it is needless to say, does not accompany her family to the public dining-room; a *tête-à-tête* with Sybilla, which is, of all forms of social intercourse, that for which he has the least relish.

But as he apprehensively opens the *salon* door, he sees that his fears are unfounded. They have not yet gone to luncheon; they are all sitting in much the same attitudes as he had left them, except that Sybilla is eating or drinking something of a soupy nature out of a cup. There are very few hours of the day or night in which Sybilla is not eating something out of a cup. There is that about the entire idleness of the other couple which gives him a fright. Are they too unhappy? Have they heard too bad

news to be able to settle to any occupation? Urged by this alarm, his question shoots out, almost before he is inside the door:

“Has not he come yet? Has not the doctor come yet?”

“He has been and gone; you see you have been such a very long time away,” replies Cecilia. She has no intention of conveying reproach, either by her words or tone; but to his sore conscience it seems as if both carried it.

“And what did he say?”

“He did not say much.”

“Does he—does he think that it is anything—anything serious?”

“He did not say.”

“Do you mean to tell me”—indignantly—“that you did not ask him?”

“If you had been here,” replies Cecilia, with a not inexcusable resentment, “you might have asked him yourself.”

“But did not you ask him?” in too real anxiety to be offended at, or even aware of, her fleer. “Did not he say?”

“I do not think he knew himself.”

“But he must have thought—he must have had an opinion!” growing the more uneasy as there seems no tangible object for his fears to lay hold of.

“He says it is impossible to judge at so early a stage; it may be a chill—I told him about that detestable excursion yesterday, and he considered it quite enough to account for anything—it may be measles—they seem to be a good deal about; it may be malaria—there is a good deal of that too.”

“And how soon will he know? How soon will it declare itself?”

“I do not know.”

“But has he prescribed? Is there nothing to be done—to be done *at once*?” asks Jim feverishly, chafing at the idea of this inaction, which seems inevitable, with that helpless feeling which his own entire ignorance of sickness produces.

“Do not you suppose that if there was we should have done it?” cries Cecilia, rendered even more uncomfortable than she was before, by the contagion of his

anxiety. "We are to keep her in bed—there is no great difficulty about that, poor soul; she has not the least desire to get up; she seems so odd and heavy!"

"So *odd and heavy*?"

"Yes; I went in to see her just now, and she scarcely took any notice of me; only when I told her that you had been to inquire after her, she lit up a little. I believe"—with a rather grudging smile—"that if she were dead, and someone mentioned your name, she would light up."

A sudden mountain rises in Jim's throat.

"If she is not better to-morrow, Dr. Coldstream will send a nurse."

"But does he think it will be necessary?"

"He does not know."

Jim writhes. It seems to him as if he were being blindfolded, and having his arms tied to his sides by a hundred strong yet invisible threads.

"Does no one know anything?" he cries miserably.

“I have told you exactly what the doctor said,” says Cecilia, with the venial crossness bred of real anxiety. “I suppose you do not wish me to invent something that he did not say?”

“Of course not ; but I wish I had been here—I wish I had been here!”—restlessly.

“Why were not you?”

No immediate answer.

“Why were not you?” repeats she, curiosity, for the moment, superseding her disquiet. “What prevented you? I thought, when you left us, that you meant to come back at once?”

“So I did, but——”

“But what?”

“I could not ; I was with Byng.”

“With Byng?” repeats Cecilia, too genuinely astonished to remember even to prefix a “Mr.” to Byng’s name. “Why, I should have thought that if there were one day of his life on which he could have done without you better than another, it would have been to-day!”

“Were not you rather *de trop*?” chimes in Sybilla’s languid voice from the sofa.
“Rather a bad third?”

“I was not a third at all.”

“Do you mean to say,” cries Cecilia, her countenance tinged with the pink of a generous indignation, “that you were *four*—that Mrs. Le Marchant stayed in the room the whole time? I must say that now that they are really and *bonâ fide* engaged, I think she might leave them alone together.”

“Mrs. Le Marchant was not there at all.” Then, seeing the open-mouthed astonishment depicted on the faces of his audience, he braces his mind to make the inevitable yet dreaded announcement. “I had better explain at once that neither Mrs. nor Miss Le Marchant were there; they are gone.”

“Gone!”

“Yes; they left Florence at seven o’clock this morning.”

There is a moment of silent stupefaction.

"I suppose," says Cecilia, at last slowly recovering the power of speech, "that they were telegraphed for? Mr. Le Marchant is dead or ill? one of the married sisters? one of the brothers?"

Never in his life has Jim laboured under so severe a temptation to tell a lie, were it only the modified falsehood of allowing Cecilia's hypothesis to pass uncontradicted; but even if he were able for once to conquer his constitutional incapacity, he knows that in this case it would be useless. The truth must transpire to-morrow.

"I believe not."

"Gone!" repeats Cecilia, in a still more thunderstruck key than before — "and where are they gone?"

"I do not know."

"Why did they go?"

Jim makes an impatient movement, fidgeting on his chair. "I can only tell you their actions; they told me their motives as little as they did you."

"Gone! Why, they never said a word about it yesterday."

This being of the nature of an assertion—not an interrogation—Jim feels with relief that it does not demand an answer.

“Gone, at seven o’clock in the morning! Why, they could not have had time to pack their things!”

“They left them behind.”

The moment that this admission is out of Burgoyne’s mouth, he repents having made it; nor does his regret at all diminish under the shower of ejaculations from both sisters that it calls forth.

“Why, it was a regular flit! they must have taken French leave.”

There is something so horribly jarring in the semi-jocosity of the last phrase that Jim jumps up from his chair and walks towards the window, where Mr. Wilson is sitting in dismal idleness.

Mr. Wilson has never cared much about the *Le Marchants*, and is now far too deeply absorbed in his own trouble to have anything but the most inattentive indifference to bestow upon the topic which to his daughters appears so riveting.

Jim blesses him for his callousness. But the window of a small room is not so distant from any other part of it that sounds cannot, with perfect ease, penetrate thither, as Jim finds when Cecilia's next eager question pursues him.

"Did Mr. Byng know that they were going?"

"No."

There is a pause.

"It is absolutely incomprehensible!" says Cecilia, with almost a gasp. "I never saw any one human being so much in love with another as she was yesterday—there was so little disguise about it, that one was really quite sorry for her—and this morning at cockcrow she decamps and leaves him without a word."

"You are mistaken—she left a note for him."

"Poor dear boy!" sighs Sybilla, "is not he quite prostrated by the blow? I am not apt to pity men generally—they are so coarse-grained—but he is much more delicately strung than the general run."

“I suppose he is frightfully cut up,” says Cecilia, with that inquisitiveness as to the details of a great affliction which we are all apt to experience.

For some perverse reason, inexplicable even to himself, Jim would like to be able to answer that his friend is not cut up at all; but truth again asserting its empire, he assents laconically, “frightfully!”

“How did he take it?”

“How do people generally take such things?”

The impatience of the key in which this is uttered, coupled with the implied side-allusion to an acquaintance with sorrows of a somewhat similar nature on her own part, silenced the younger and sounder Miss Wilson for a moment, but only for a moment—a moment long enough to be filled by another sighing “Poor dear boy!” from Sybilla.

“You say that she left a note for him?”—with a renewed light of curiosity in her eyes—“have you any idea what was in it?”

Jim hesitates ; then, "yes," he replies ; "but as it was not addressed to me, I do not think that I have any right to repeat it."

"Of course not!"—reluctantly ; "but did it throw no light—absolutely no light at all—upon this extraordinary stampede?"

"No."

"Did not she even tell him where they were going?"

"No."

"Nor whether they were coming back?"

"No."

"Nor ask him to follow her?"

"If she did not tell him where she was going, is it likely that she would ask him to follow her?" cries Jim irritably, deeply annoyed to find that he is, by the series of negatives that is being forced from him, doing the very thing which he had just denied his own right to do.

"It is the most incomprehensible thing I ever heard in my life. I wonder"—with an air of even alerter interest than before—"what Mr. Greenock will say? Perhaps

he will now tell what he knows about them ; if they are gone, there will no longer be any need to conceal it. I am afraid this looks rather as if there were something !”

For the second time in one day the mention of an amiable *flâneur's* name makes Jim vault to his feet.

“ Well, I will not keep you any longer from your luncheon,” he cries hastily. “ I will call in again later.”

“ Are you going ?” asks Mr. Wilson dully, lifting his head from his chest, upon which it is sunk. “ Well, you are about right ; we are not much good to anyone when our mainspring is gone.”

The phrase strikes cold on Jim's heart.

“ Are you going back to the poor dear boy ?” inquires Sybilla as he passes her. “ By-the-bye, if it is not too much trouble, would you mind tucking the Austrian blanket a little closer in on the left side ?” and as he stoops to perform the asked-for service, she adds : “ Let him know how sincerely I sympathize with him ; and if he wants anything quieting for his nerves,

tell him that there is nothing that I can more conscientiously recommend than——”

But what Sybilla can conscientiously recommend is shut into the closing door. Outside that door Jim finds that Cecilia has joined him. Anxiety has quite banished the not altogether disagreeable curiosity of five minutes ago, from the troubled face she lifts to his.

“You will come back, will not you?” she asks. “You are not of much use, I suppose; but still, one feels that you are there, and we are all so much at sea. You have not an idea how much we are at sea—without her.”

“I think that I have a very good idea,” he answers mournfully. “Tell me, Cis; do you think she is really very ill?”

As he puts the question, he feels its irrationality. He knows that the person to whom he is making his futile appeal has already given him all the scanty tidings she has to give; yet he cannot help indulging a faint hope that her response to this last query of his may perhaps set

Amelia's condition in a slightly more favourable light. A look of helpless distress clouds Cecilia's already cloudy face.

"I tell you I do not know; I am no judge; I have seen so little real illness. Sybilla would kill me if she heard me say so, would not she?"—with a slight parenthetical smile—"but I have seen so little real illness, that I do not know what things mean; I do not know what it means that she should be so heavy and stupid. As I told you before, the only time that she roused up at all was when I mentioned your——"

He stops her, breaking rudely into her sentence. He cannot bear to hear that it is only at the magic of his name that his poor faithful love lifts her sick head.

"Yes, yes; I remember."

"Some one ought to sit up with her, I am sure," pursues Cecilia, still with that same helpless air of disquiet; "she ought not to be left alone all night; but who? I should be more than willing to do it, but I know that I should fall asleep in

five minutes, and I am such a heavy sleeper that, when once I am off, there is no possibility of waking me. I am a dreadfully bad sick-nurse ; father can never bear to have me near him when he has the gout."

Burgoyne is too well aware of the perfect truth of this last statement to attempt any contradiction of it.

" Amelia has always been the one to sit up when any one was ill," continues she wofully ; " and even now, by a stupid confusion of ideas, I catch myself thinking, ' Oh, Amelia will sit up with her ! ' before I can realise that *her* is Amelia herself."

Jim can well sympathize with this same confusion, when, several times during his walk back to the Piazza d' Azeglio, a muddled thought of comfort, in the idea that he will go and tell Amelia what a terrible day of anxiety about some one he has been having, taps at the door of his brain. The portals of No. 12 are once again opened to him by Annunziata, who indicates to him, by a series of compas-

sionate gestures and liquid Tuscan sentences, that the *povero* is still within, and the Padrona, who this time also appears on the scene, and who is possessed of somewhat more English than her handmaid, intimates, albeit with a good deal of sympathy for his sufferings, yet with still more of determination, that it would be no bad thing were he to be removed, since, whether the sun shines or the rain falls, people must live, and the apartment has to be prepared for new occupants.

Anything that speaks less intention of removing than Byng's pose, when his friend rejoins him, it would be difficult to imagine. He is stretched upon the parquet floor, with his head lying on the small footstool that has been wont to support Elizabeth's feet ; her rifled work-basket stands on the floor beside him, while her bit of embroidery half shrouds his distorted face. The needle, still sticking in it, may prick his eyes out for all he cares ; the book she last read is open at the page where she has put her mark of a skein of pale silk ; and the yellow

anemones, that he must have plucked for her yesterday in drenched Vallombrosa, are crushed under his hot cheek. But outwardly he is quite quiet. Jim puts his hand on his shoulder.

“Come away, there is no use in your staying here any longer.”

As he receives no answer, he repeats the exhortation more imperatively, “Come.”

“Why should I come? Where should I come to?” says the young man, lifting his head, “where can I find such plain traces of her as here? I will stay.”

He says this with an air of resolution, and once more lays down his face upon the footstool, which, being entirely worked in beads, has impressed the cheek thrust against it with a design in small hollows, a fact of which the sufferer is quite unaware.

“You cannot stay!” cries Burgoyne, the more impatiently that his own share of anxiety is fretting his temper almost past endurance; “you cannot stay, it is out of the question; they want to come into the rooms, to prepare them for new occupants.”

“*New occupants !*” repeats Byng, turning over almost on his face, and flattening his nose and lips against the beaded surface of his stool, “other occupants than *her*. Never ! never !”

It is to be placed to the credit side of Mr. Burgoyne’s account that he does not, upon this declaration, withdraw the resting-place from his young friend’s countenance and break it over his head. It is certainly not the temptation to do so that is lacking. Instead, he sits down at some distance off, and says quietly :

“I see, you will force them to call in the police. You will make a discreditable *esclandre*. How good for her ; how conducive to her good name. I congratulate you !”

The other has lifted his head in a moment.

“What do you mean ?”

“Do you think,” asks Jim indignantly, “that it is ever very advantageous to a woman to have her name mixed up in a vulgar row ? And do you suppose that hers will be kept out of it ? Come”—seeing a look of shocked consternation

breaking over the young man's face, and determined to strike while the iron is hot—"I will call a fiacre, and we will go home to the hotel. Put back her things into her basket. What right have you to meddle with them? You have no business to take advantage of her absence to do what you would not do if she were here."

Byng obeys with a scared docility; his eyes are so dim, and his fingers tremble so much, that Jim has to help him in replacing Elizabeth's small properties. His own heart is pricked with a cruel smart that has no reference to Amelia's illness, as he handles the departed girl's spools and skeins, and awkwardly folds her scrap of broidery. Byng offers no further resistance, and, equally indifferent to his own bunged-up eyes, bead-marked cheeks, and dishevelled locks, follows his companion dully, down the stone stairs, compassionately watched from the top by Annunziata, whose heart is an inconveniently tender one to be matched with so tough a face. They get into the fiacre, and drive in dead

silence to the Minerva. Arrived there, Jim persuades his friend, who now seems prepared to acquiesce meekly in whatever he is told to do, to lie down on his bed, since the few words that he utters convey the fact of his being suffering from a burning headache, a phenomenon not very surprising, considering his late briny exercises, since, even at the superb age of twenty-two, it is difficult to spend six hours in banging your forehead against a parquet floor, in moaning, bellowing, and weeping, without leaving some traces of these gymnastics on your physique.

Burgoyne stands or sits patiently beside him, bathing his fiery temples with eau-de-Cologne, not teasing him with any questions, having, indeed, on his own part, the least possible desire for conversation ; and so the heavy hours go by. The day has declined to evening before Burgoyne quits his *protégé's* side to dine, shortly and solitarily, previous to making a third visit to the Anglo-Américain, to learn the latest news of his betrothed.

He had left Byng still stretched upon his bed, apparently asleep, and is therefore the more surprised, on returning to take a final look at him before setting out on his own errand, to find him up, with hat and stick in hand, evidently prepared for a walk.

“You are going out?”

“Yes.”

“Where are you going?”

The other hesitates.

“I am going back there.”

“Impossible!”

“But I am,” replies Byng doggedly; “it will not do *her* any injury, for I shall not attempt to go in, I shall only ask at the door whether any telegram has yet been received from — from them; they must telegraph to direct where their things are to be sent to, and it is most probable that they have done so already.”

“It is most *improbable*.”

“Well, at all events, it is possible, it is worth trying, and I mean to try it.”

There is such a fixed resolution in his

voice, which is no longer quavering with sobs, and in his ashy face, that Jim offers no further resistance. The only concession he can obtain from him is that of permitting him to accompany him.

“You will not mind coming with me to the Anglo-Américain first, will you?” inquires Jim, as they set off walking across the Piazza.

“It will delay us quite half-an-hour,” answers the other restlessly. “But stay” (a hazy look of reminiscence dawning over his preoccupied haggard face), “did you tell me that Amelia was ill—or did I dream it?”

“No, you did not dream it,” replies the other sadly. “She *is* ill.”

Perhaps the wretchedness that pierces through his friend’s quiet tones recalls the young dreamer to the fact that the world holds other miseries than his own. There is at all events something of his old quick sympathy in his next words, and in the way in which they are uttered:

“Oh, poor Amelia, I *am* sorry! By all means let us go at once and ask after her.

Is there nothing that we can get?—nothing that we can do for her?”

It is the question that Jim, in baffled anxiety, puts when he is admitted inside the dull *salon*, where no love-glorified, homely face to-night lights up the tender candles of its glad eyes, from over its stitching, at his entry.

Sybilla is lying less comfortably than usual on her sofa, her cushions not plumped up, and her bottle of smelling-salts rolled out of her reach. Mr. Wilson is walking uneasily up and down the room, instead of sitting placidly in his chair, with the soothing voice—which he had always thought as much to be counted on, and as little to be particularly thankful for, as the air that fills his lungs—lulling reading him to sleep.

“Cecilia is with her just now,” he says, in a voice of forlorn irritation. “I wish she would come down again; I have no great opinion of Cecilia as a sick-nurse, and she must know how anxious we are.”

A moment later, still pursuing his fidgety

ramble from wall to wall, and exclaiming peevishly, as he stumbles over a footstool : “ If it would only declare itself ! There seems to be nothing to lay hold of, we are so completely in the dark—if it would only declare itself ! ”

A not very subdued sob from the sofa is the only answer he gets, an answer which evidently irritates still further his fretted nerves.

“ I cannot think what Cecilia is doing ! ” he cries, hastening to the door, opening it noisily, and then listening.

“ Let me run up and see,” says Jim, his heart going out to the fractious old man in a sympathy of suffering. “ Yes, I know where her room is—*au troisième*, is not it ? ” (a flash of recollection lighting up the fact that Amelia’s is distinctly the worst room of the suite occupied by the Wilson family ; the room with most stairs to climb to, and least accommodation when you reach it). “ I will knock quite gently. Do not be afraid, I will not disturb her, and I will come down immediately to tell you.”

Without waiting for permission, he springs up the stairs, and, standing on the landing, taps cautiously on the closed door, whose number (by one of those quirks of memory that furnish all our minds with insignificant facts) he has recollected. His first knock is so superfluously soft that it is evidently inaudible within, since no result follows upon it. His second, a shade louder, though still muffled by the fear of breaking into some little fitful yet salutary sleep, brings Cecilia out. His first glance at her face shows him that she has no good news, either to warm his own heart, or for him to carry down as a solace to the poor old man below.

“Oh, it is you, is it?” says she, shutting the door behind her with a clumsy carefulness that makes it creak. “No, I do not think she is any better; but it is so difficult to tell, I am no judge. She does not complain of anything particular; but she looks so *odd*.”

It is the same adjective that Cecilia had applied earlier in the day to her sick

sister, and it fills Jim with an impotent terror.

“ If she is asleep, might not I just look in at her ?” he asks. “ I do not know what you mean when you say she looks *odd*.”

“ She is not asleep,” replies Cecilia, in a noisy whisper, much more likely to pierce sick ears than a voice pitched in its normal key ; “ at least, I think not. But I am sure you ought not to see her ; Dr. Coldstream said she was to be kept very quiet, and nothing would upset her so much as seeing you.”

“ She need not see me ; I would only take just one look at her from behind the door,” persists Jim, who feels a desire, whose gnawing intensity surprises himself, to be assured by the evidence of his own eyes that his poor love’s face has not undergone some strange and gruesome change, such as is suggested by Cecilia’s disquieting epithet.

“ Do you think she would not know you were there ?” asks she scornfully. “ Why, she hears your step three streets off !”



CHAPTER XXVIII.

So that night Jim does not see Amelia. After all, as Cecilia says, it is better to be on the safe side, and to-morrow she will be brighter, and he can sit by her, and tell her lovingly—oh very lovingly!—what a fright she has given him. Yes, to-morrow she will be brighter. The adjective is Cecilia's ; but, apparently, he cannot improve upon it, for he not only keeps repeating it to himself as he runs downstairs, but employs it for the reassurance of Miss Wilson's anxious relatives.

“She will be brighter to-morrow ; sick people are always worse at night, are not they ?”—rather vaguely, with again that oppressive sense of his own inexperience

in illness. "Not that she is *worse*"—this is hastily subjoined, as he sees her father's face fall—"Cecilia never said she was *worse*—oh, no, not *worse*, only not distinctly better ; and, after all, it would have been irrational to expect that. She will be brighter to-morrow—oh, yes, of course she will be brighter to-morrow !"

He leaves the hotel with the phrase, which sounds cut and dried and unreal, still upon his lips, after bidding a kinder good-night than usual to Mr. Wilson, after having offered to supply Amelia's place by reading aloud to him, a feat he has not performed since the evening of his disastrous experience of the Provident Women of Oxford ; and lastly, having even—as a reward to Sybilla, who has been understood to murmur something tearful about letting her maid look in upon Amelia at intervals through the night—tucked in her Austrian blanket, and picked up her smelling-bottle. He has expected to rejoin Byng outside, as he had promised to wait for him with such patience as a cigar could lend, and on the

condition that his absence should not exceed a stipulated period. But either the promise has been broken, or the period exceeded, for Byng is gone. The fact does not greatly surprise Burgoyne, though it causes him a slight uneasiness, which is, perhaps, rather a blessing for him, distracting his mind in some slight measure from the heaviness of his own trouble.

He walks fast to the Piazza d' Azeglio ; but he neither overtakes him of whom he is in pursuit, nor finds him at 12 bis. He has been there, has inquired with agitation for the telegrams, which have naturally not been received, and has then gone away again immediately. Whither ? The Padrona, who has answered the door-bell herself, and, with Italian suavity, is doing her best to conceal that she is beginning to think she has heard nearly enough of the subject, does not know. For a few moments Jim stands irresolute, then he turns his steps towards the Arno. It is not yet too late for the charming riverside promenade, the gay Lung'Arno, to be still alive with

flâneurs; the stars have lit their lamps above, and the hotels below. The pale planets, and the yellow lights from the opposite bank of the river, lie together, sweet and peaceful upon her breast. In both cases the counterfeits are as clear and bright as the real luminaries; and it seems as if one had only to plunge in an arm to pick up stars and candles out of the stream's depths.

Leaning over the parapet near the Ponte Vecchio, Burgoyne soon discovers a familiar figure, a figure which starts when he touches its arm.

"I thought I would wait about here for an hour or so," says Byng, with a rather guilty air of apology, "until I could go back and inquire again. The telegram has not arrived yet—I suppose it is too early. Of course they would not telegraph until they get in to-night. You do not think"—with a look of almost terror—"that they are going through to England, and that they will not telegraph till they get there?"

"How can I tell?"

“There is nothing in the world less likely,” cries Byng feverishly, irritated at not having drawn forth the reassurance he had hoped for. “I do not for a moment believe that they have gone home; I feel convinced that they are still in Italy! Why should they leave it, when they—when she is so fond of it?”

Jim looks down sadly at the calm, strong stream.

“I do not know, I cannot give an opinion—I have no clue.”

“I will ask again in about an hour,” says Byng, lifting his arms from the parapet, “in an hour it is pretty certain to have arrived; and meanwhile, I thought I would just stroll about the town, but there is no reason—none at all—why I should keep you! You—you must be wanting to go back to Amelia.”

He glances at his friend in a nervous, sidelong way, as he makes this suggestion.

“I am not going back again to-night,” replies Jim quietly, without giving any evidence of an intention to acquiesce in his

dismissal. "There is nothing that I can do for her—there is nothing to be done."

His tone, in making this statement, must be yet more dreary than he is aware, as it arouses even Byng's self-absorbed attention.

"Nothing to be done for her?" he echoes, with a shocked look. "My dear old chap, you do not mean to say—to imply——"

"I mean to imply nothing," interrupts Jim sharply, in a superstitious panic of hearing some unfavourable augury as to his betrothed put into words. "I mean just what I say—neither more nor less ; there is nothing to be done for her to-night, nothing but to let her sleep—a good sleep will set her up : of course a good sleep will quite set her up."

He speaks almost angrily, as if expecting and challenging contradiction. But Byng's spirit has already flown back to his own woes. He may make what sanguine statements he pleases about Amelia's to-morrow, without fearing any demurrer from his companion. What attention the latter has to spare is evidently only directed to the

solving of the problem, how best, with amicable civility, to be rid of him. Before he can hit upon any expedient for attaining this desired end, Burgoyne speaks again, his eye resting with a compassionate expression upon his junior's face, whose wild pallor is heightened by the disorder of his hair, and the hat crushed down over his brows.

"You have not had anything to eat all day—had not you better come back to the hotel and get something to eat?"

"Eat!" cries the other, with almost a scream; "you must have very little comprehension of——" Then, checking himself, and with a strong and palpable effort for composure: "It would not be worth while, I should not have time, in an hour—less than an hour now, for I must have been here quite ten minutes at the least—I have to return to the Piazza d'Azeglio."

"Then go to Doney's; why not get something to eat at Doney's? It will not take you five minutes to reach the Via Tornabuoni."

"What should I do when I got there?"

asks Byng impatiently. "If I tried to swallow food, it would stick in my throat ; no food shall pass my lips till I learn where she is ; after that"—breaking out into a noisy laugh—"you may do what you please with me—we will make a night of it with all my heart, we will—

“ ‘ Drink, drink,
Till the pale stars blink ! ’ ”

Jim looks blankly at him. Is he going mad ?

“ If you think that you will get me to go back to the hotel to-night, you are very much mistaken,” continues Byng recklessly ; “ no roof less high than this ”—jerking back his head, to throw his fevered look up to the cool stars—“ shall shelter my head ; and besides, where would be the use of going to bed when I should have to be up again so early ? I shall be off by one of the morning expresses : until I have learnt—as of course, I shall do to-night—where she has gone, I cannot tell which ; but neither of them starts much later than seven.”

For a moment Jim stands dumb with consternation at the announcement of this intention ; but, reflecting that it would not be a whit more irrational to attempt to reason with a madman who had reached the padded-room stage of lunacy, than with his present companion, he contents himself with saying :

“ And supposing that you do not learn to-night where she has gone ? ”

“ There is no use in supposing anything so impossible ! ”

But as the hours go by, the possibility becomes a probability, the probability a certainty ! Midnight comes, and the closed telegraph-office puts a final extinguisher upon the expectation, which no one but the unhappy lover had ever entertained, that Florence would be enlightened before the dawn of another day as to the place whither her two truants have fled.

Burgoyne has accompanied his friend upon his last importunate visit to the now-going-to-bed and justly-incensed 12 bis. He has been ashamed again to present

himself at the so-often-attacked door, so has awaited at the bottom of the stairs, has heard Byng's hoarse query, and the negative—curter and less suave than the last one—that follows it; has heard the door shut again, and the hopeless footsteps that come staggering down to him.

“ You will go home now ? ”

“ ‘ Perchance, Iago, I shall ne’er go home ! ’ ”

replies Byng ; and, though he is compelled to admit that there is no longer any possibility of his to-night obtaining the information for which he so madly hungers, that there can consequently be no question of his setting off by one of the early trains, since he would not know in which direction to go, and might only be fleeing further from her whom he would fain rejoin, yet he still keeps with fevered pertinacity to his project of spending the night *à la belle étoile*.

Finding it impossible to dissuade him, Jim resigns himself to bearing him company. It is with very little reluctance that he does so. There is no truer truism than that all

sorrows, however mountainous, are more easily carried under God's high roof than man's low ones, and he who does not sleep has for compensation that at least he can have no dreadful waking. So the two men wander about all night in the boon southern air, and see—

“The moon exactly round,
And all those stars with which the brows of ample
heaven are crown'd ;
Orion, all the Pleiades, and those seven Atlas got ;
The close-beam'd Hyades, the Bear, surnamed the
Chariot,
That turns about heaven's axle-tree, holds ope a
constant eye
Upon Orion, and of all the cressets in the sky,
His golden forehead never bows to the Ocean's
empyry.”

There are not many hours of a summer's night during which the stir of life has ceased and has not yet reawaked in an Italian town, the talk and the tread and the mule bells, and the flutes of the voiceful people lasting on till near the small hours, and beginning again ere those hours have had strength to grow big. But yet there is a space of time when Florence lies silent,

baring her beauty to the constellations alone ; and under this unfamiliar and solemn and lovely aspect the two night-wanderers see her. They see her Campanile

“Commercing with the skies,”

with no distracting human bustle about her feet; they see her Perseus battling beneath her Loggia, and her San Giorgio standing wakeful at his post on Or san Michele. They see her scowling palace rows, her stealing river, and her spanning bridges—palaces out of which no head peeps, a river on which no boat oars, bridges upon which no horse-hoof rings. They have all her churches—Santa Croce, Arnolphi's great “Bride,” that *new* Maria that is now four hundred years old or more, the humbly glorious San Marco—to themselves ; all her treasure houses, all her memories, all her flower-embalmed air—for a few hours they possess them all. She is but a little city, this fair Firenze, and in these few hours they traverse her in her length and breadth, rambling aimlessly wherever

Byng's feverishly miserable impulses lead them. Burgoyne offers no opposition to any of these, but accompanies his friend silently down slumbrous thoroughfare, or across sleeping Piazza, by Arno side, under colonnade or arch. It is all one to him; nor is he sensible of any fatigue, when at length, at about the hour when Byng had meant to have caught the early morning train, they return to the hotel, and the younger man, happily dead-beat at last, worn out with want of food, tears, and weariness, flings himself down, dressed, upon his bed, and instantly falls into a leaden sleep. Jim feels no desire, nor indeed any power of following his example. He is not easily tired, and his former life of travel and hardship has made him always willing to dispense with the—to him—unnecessary luxury of a bed; and, under ordinary circumstances, a night passed in the open air would have had an effect upon him rather exhilarating than otherwise. He has his bath, dresses, breakfasts, and then jumps into a fiacre, and has himself driven to the Anglo-Américain.

The day is so exactly the counterpart of its predecessor, in its even assured splendour, that Jim has a hazy feeling that they both make only one divided into two parts by the narrow dark blue ribbon of the exquisite brief night. When did yesterday end and to-day begin? As he is borne along, his memory, made more alert by sleeplessness, reproduces—merely, as it seems to him, the better to fill him with pain and remorse—the different states of mind in which he has passed over the often trodden ground. Here, at the street corner, what a nausea had come over him at the thought of the interest he would have to feign in those humdrum details, so dear to Amelia's soul, of their future *ménage*, with all its candle-end economies and depressing restrictions. Here, in the church shadow, how he had tried to lash himself up into a more probable semblance of pleasure in her expected and dreaded caresses. There seems to be scarcely an inch of the way where he has not had some harsh or weary thought of her; he is thankful when the

brief transit, that has appeared to him so long, is over. And yet the change is only from the sharp sting of recollected unkindness to the dull bruising ache of anticipated ill. A *garçon* is sweeping out the *salon*, for the hour is not much beyond eight, so Jim goes into the dreary little dining-room, where two places are laid with coffee-cups and rolls. Only two. And, though he knows that nothing short of a miracle could have already restored Amelia so completely as to enable her to come down to breakfast, yet the ocular demonstration of the fact that her place is and will be empty, strikes a chill to his boding heart. He is presently joined by Cecilia, whose carelessly-dressed hair, heavy eyelids, and tired puffy face, sufficiently show that not to her, any more than to himself, has night brought

“Sweet child sleep, the filmy-eyed.”

“How fresh and cool you are!” she cries, with an almost reproachful intonation. “Do not look at me!”—covering her face with her hot hands—“I am not fit to be

seen ; but what does that matter ? What do I care ?"—beginning to cry—" Oh, she is so bad ! We have spent such a dreadful night ! As I tell you, I am a shocking sick-nurse ; I never know what to do ; I lose my head completely ; and she has been so odd—she has been talking such gibberish !"

" Delirious ?"

" Yes, I suppose that is what you would call it. I never saw anybody delirious before, so I do not know. I have seen Sybilla in hysterics, but I never believed that they were real—I always thought that a bucket of water would bring her round."

As a general rule, Jim may be counted upon for cordial co-operation in any hit directed against Sybilla, but now he is too spiritless even to notice it.

" I was so frightened," continues Cecilia ; " it is not cheerful being all alone at the dead of night with a person talking such nonsense as she was. Amelia, of all people, to talk nonsense ! I could not quite make out what it was about, but it seemed to have more or less reference to you. She

was begging you to forgive her for something she had done, as far as I could gather; some treat she had prepared for you, and that you had not liked. Have you the least idea what she could have meant?"

He has every idea; but it would seem profanation to explain that her poor wandering brain is still distressedly labouring with the abortive project she had so happily framed for his enjoyment.

"She is quieter now. Sybilla's maid is with her; Sybilla really has not behaved badly—*for her*; she let her maid look in several times during the night; but still, for the most part I was alone with her! Oh, I do trust"—shuddering—"that I may never again have to be alone at night with a person who is not right in her head!"

This aspiration on the youngest Miss Wilson's part is, for the present occasion, at least, likely to be gratified; for, by the time that another night settles down on Florence, Amelia's illness has been declared by Dr. Coldstream to have every symptom of developing into the malarious Florentine

fever, which not unfrequently lays low the chilled or over-fatigued, or generally imprudent foreign visitor to that little Eden. Amelia has Florentine fever ; and the verification of this fact is followed by all the paraphernalia of serious sickness—night and day nurses, disinfectants, physic phials.

The announcement of her being attacked by a definite and recognised disease brings at first a sort of relief to Burgoyne's mind, which, under Cecilia's frightened and frightening word-pictures, had been beset by terrors great in proportion to their vagueness. Now that Amelia is confessedly sick of a fever, there is nothing abnormal in her being "odd," and "stupid," and "wandering," these being only the inevitable stages on a road which will—which *must* lead to ultimate recovery. His heart is heavy, yet scarcely so heavy as it had been upon his arrival in the morning, when, late in the afternoon—not sooner do the claims upon him of the disorganized and helpless family of his betrothed relax—he returns to the Minerva to look after Byng. Having had

every reason to fear that he will not find him at the hotel, but will be obliged again to set off in pursuit of him through the streets and squares so repeatedly traversed last night, he is relieved to learn from the hotel servants that the young man is in his bedroom. He finds him there indeed ; no longer stretched in the blessed oblivion of deep sleep upon his bed, but sitting on a hard chair by the open window, his arms resting upon the back, and his face crushed down upon them. By no slightest movement does he show consciousness of his friend's entrance.

"I am afraid I have been a long time away," says the latter kindly.

"Have you?" answers Byng, his voice coming muffled through lips still buried in his own coat-sleeve. "I do not know ; I have done with time!"

"I do not know how you have managed that," rejoins Jim, still indulgently, though a shade drily. "Have you been here all day?"

"I do not know where I have been.

Yes,"—lifting his head—"I do ; I have been to the Piazza d' Azeglio."

"Well?"

"They know where she is. They were packing her things ; through the door I saw them tying the label on the box ; if I had tried I could have read the address on the label, but I did not. She had forbidden them to give it to me ; in her telegram she had forbidden them to give it to anyone."





CHAPTER XXIX.

JIM refrains from saying how likely this culmination of his friend's woes has appeared to him, since it would have been the height of the illogical for the Le Marchants to have put themselves to extreme inconvenience in order to escape from a person to whom they immediately afterwards gave the power of following them. He refrains from saying it, because he knows of how very little consoling power the "told you so" philosophy is possessed.

"And what will you do now?"

"Do! What is there to do? What does a man do when he is shot through the heart?"

"I believe that in point of fact he jumps

his own height in the air. I know that a buffalo does," replies Burgoyne with a matter-of-fact dryness, which proceeds less from want of sympathy, than from an honest belief that it is the best and kindest method of dealing with Byng's heroics.

"*Shot through the heart !*" murmurs the latter, repeating his own phrase as if he found a dismal pleasure in it. "I had always been told that it was a painless death ; I now know to the contrary."

"Shall you stay here? There is no longer any use in your staying here."

"There is no longer any use in my doing anything, or leaving anything undone.

" 'There's nothing in this world can make me joy ;
Life is as tedious as a twice-told tale,
Vexing the dull ear of a drowsy man.' "

So saying, he replaces his head upon his arms, and his arms upon the chair-rail, with the air of one who, upon mature consideration, has decided to maintain that attitude for the remainder of his life.

* * * * *

A week has passed ; a week upon which Burgoyne looks back as upon a blur of wretchedness, with distinct points of pain sticking up here and there out of it. It is a blur ; for it is a time-space, without the usual limitations and divisions of time ; a week not cut up into orderly lengths of day and night, but in which each has puzzlingly run into and overlapped each. There have been nights when he has not been in bed at all, and there have been days when he has slept heavily at unaccustomed hours. He has not dined at any particular time ; he has shared forlorn breakfast, dotted about the morning as the less or more anxiety about Amelia dictated, with the Wilsons. He has drunk more tea than he ever did in his life before, and the result of this whole condition of things is, that he cannot for the life of him tell whether the day of the week is Wednesday, or Thursday, or Friday, and that he has lost all sense of proportion. He has not the least idea whether the dreadful moments when he stood on the landing

outside Amelia's door, and heard her heart-rendingly beg him not to go away from her for *quite* so long, to be a little gladder to see her when he came back ; or again affectingly assure him that she can do quite well, be quite cheerful without him—whether, I say, those dreadful moments were really only moments, or stretched into hours.

Besides the agony of remorse that the impotent listening to those pathetic prayers and unselfish assurances cause him, he suffers too from another agony of shame, that the father and sister, standing like himself with ears stretched at that shut door, should be let into the long secret of his cruelty and coldness, that secret which for eight years she has so gallantly been hiding. It is an inexpressible relief to him that at least the old man's thickened hearing admits, but very imperfectly, his daughter's rapid utterances.

“Poor soul! I cannot quite make out what it is all about,” he says, with his hand to his ear ; “but I catch your name

over and over again, Jim ; I suppose it is all about you."

Cecilia, however, naturally hears as well as he himself does, and apparently pitying the drawn misery of his face, whispers to him comfortingly—

"You must not mind, you know it is all nonsense. She talks very differently when she is well."

The Wilson family have never hitherto shown any very marked affection for Burgoyne, but now it seems as if they could hardly bear him out of their sight. They cling to him, not because he is *he*—Jim makes himself no illusion on that head—but because they have got into such a habit of leaning, that it is no longer possible to them to stand upright. He had never realized till now how helpless they are. He had known that Amelia was the pivot upon which the whole family turned ; but he had not brought home to himself how utterly the machine fell to pieces when that pivot was withdrawn.

In the course of the past week each member of the family has confided to him separately how far more she or he misses Amelia, than can be possible to either of the others. Upon this head Sybilla's lamentations are the loudest and most frequent. She had at first refused to admit that there was anything at all the matter with her sister, but has now fallen into the no less trying opposite extreme of refusing to allow that there is any possibility of her recovery, talking of her as if she were almost beyond the reach of human aid. Sybilla's grief for her sister is perfectly genuine; none the less so that it is complicated by irritation at her own deposition from her post of first invalid, at having been compelled to confess the existence in the bosom of her own family of a traitor, with an indisputably higher temperature and more wavering pulse than she.

"It is ridiculous to suppose that a person in such rude health as Cecilia *can* miss her as I do," she says querulously; "I was

always her first object, she always knew by instinct when I was more suffering than usual; who cares now"—breaking into a deluge of self-compassionating tears—"whether I am suffering or not?"

Then, when next he happens to be alone with Cecilia, it is her turn to assert a superiority of woe; a superiority claimed with still more emphasis the next half hour by the father. With a patience which would have surprised those persons who had seen him only in his former relations with the family of his betrothed he tries to soothe the sorrow of each—even that of Sybilla—in turn; but to his own heart he says that not one of their griefs is worthy to be weighed in the balance with his. In the case of none of theirs is the woof crossed by the hideous warp of self-reproach that is woven inextricably into his. They have worked her to death, they have torn her to pieces by their conflicting claims; their love has been exacting, selfish, inconsiderate; but at least it has been love; they have prized

her at almost her full worth while they had her. For him it has been reserved, as for the base Indian, to

“Throw a pearl away
Richer than all his tribe.”

In the intervals—neither long nor many—between his ministrations at the Anglo-Américain, Burgoyne hurries back to the Minerva to see that Byng has not blown his brains out. In the present state of mind of that young gentleman this catastrophe does not appear to be among the least likely ones. He has refused to leave Florence, always answering the suggestion with the same question, “Where else should I go?” and if pressed, adding invariably in the same words as those employed by him on the first day of his loss, when his friend had urged the advisability of his removing his countenance from the beaded stool—“Where shall I find such recent and authentic traces of her as here?”

He passes his time either on the Lung’ Arno, staring at the water, or stretched

face downwards upon his bed. He walks about the town most of the night, and Jim suspects him of beginning to take chlorale. Occasionally he rouses up into a quick and almost passionate sympathy with his friend's trouble, asking for nothing better than to be sent on any errand, however trivial, or however tiresome, in Amelia's behalf. But no sooner have the immediate effects of the appeal to his kind-heartedness died away, than he sinks back into his lethargy, and Jim is at once too much occupied and too miserable to use any very strenuous endeavours to shake him out of it. But yet the consciousness of the tacit engagement, under which he lies to the young man's mother, to look after him, coupled with the absolute impossibility, under his present circumstances, of fulfilling that engagement, and his uneasiness as to what new form the insanity of Byng's grief may take on, from day to day, add very perceptibly to the weight of his own already sufficiently ponderous burden.

It is the ninth day since Amelia fell sick,

that ninth day which, in maladies such as hers, is, or is at least reckoned to be, the crisis and turning-point of the disease. Jim has been up all night, and has just rushed back to the *Minerva*, for the double purpose of taking a bath, and of casting an uneasy eye upon his charge. He finds the latter not in his room, but leaning over the little spiky balcony, out of his window, hanging over it so far, and so absorbedly, that he does not hear his friend's approach, and starts violently when Jim lays a hand on his shoulder.

“What are you looking at?”

“I; oh — nothing particular! What should I be looking at? What is there to look to? I was only—only—wondering as a mere matter of curiosity, how many feet it is from here to the pavement? Sixteen? eighteen? twenty?”

Jim's only answer is to look at him sadly and sternly; then he says coldly:

“I do not recommend it; it would be a clumsy way of doing it.”

“What matter how clumsy the way, so

that one attains the end?" asks Byng extravagantly, throwing off even the thin pretence he had at first assumed; "who cares how bad the road is so that it leads him to the goal?"

"Oh, amiable lovely death!

Thou odoriferous stench, sound rottenness!"

Jim shudders. Death has been so near to him for the last nine days, that the terrific realism of Constance's apostrophe seems to be almost more than he can bear.

"It is silliness to live when to live is a torment, and then, have we a prescription to die, when death is our physician!" continues Byng loudly and wildly, clasping his hands above his head, and apparently perfectly indifferent as to whether the other inmates of the hotel, or passers-by on the piazza, overhear him.

"If you stay here much longer you will spare yourself the trouble of putting an end to your existence," replies Jim, glancing at the other's head, exposed hatless to the scorch of the Tuscan sun, "for you will certainly get a sunstroke."

So saying, he takes him quietly, yet decidedly, by the arm, and leads him within the room. Either his matter-of-fact manner, or the sight of his face, upon which, well-seasoned as it is, vigil and sorrow have begun to write their unavoidable marks, brings the young madman back to some measure of sense and self-control.

“I had no fixed intention,” he says apologetically, still looking white and wild; “you must not think I meant anything; but, even if I had—do you know—have you ever happened to read anything about the statistics of suicide? Do you know what an increasing number of people every year find life intolerable?”

“I know that you are fast making *my* life intolerable,” answers Jim, fixing his tired, sleepless eyes with melancholy severity upon his companion. “Amelia is—you are as well aware of it as I am—probably dying, and yet even now, thanks to you, into my thoughts of her is continually pushing the fear that I may have to tell your mother that you have had the colossal

selfishness to rush out of the world, because, for the first time in your pampered life, the toy you cried for has not been put into your hand."

Burgoyne's hopes have not been high, as to any salutary result of his own philippic while uttering it. But our words, sometimes, to our surprise, turn from wooden swords to steel daggers in our hands. For a moment Byng stands as if stunned; then he breaks into a tornado of sobs and tears, such tears as have often before angered his friend, but which now he welcomes the sight of, as perhaps precursors of a saner mood.

"Oh, my dear old chap!" he cries, catching at Jim's unresponsive hand, and wringing it hard, "she is not dying *really*? You do not mean it? You are only saying it to frighten me? Oh! dear, kind Amelia. Not dying? not dying?"

"I do not know: to-day is the turning-point, they say; even now it may have come."

"And why are not you with her?"

Why do not you go back to her?" cries Byng, in a broken voice of passionate excitement, the tears still racing down his face.

"And leave you to go tomfooling out there again?" asks Jim, with a nod of his head towards the balcony, seen from where they stand, grilling in the midday blaze.

The verb employed, if closely looked into, bears a ludicrous disproportion to the intended action indicated, but neither of the men see anything ridiculous in it.

"I will not!" cries Byng, in eager asseveration, "I give you my word of honour I will not; if you do not believe me, take me with you! Keep me with you all day! Do you think that I, too, do not want to know how Amelia is? Do you think that I am indifferent as to whether she lives or dies? Poor, good Amelia! When I think of that drive to Vallombrosa, only ten days ago! They two sitting side by side, so happy, laughing and making friends with each other!"

He covers his face with his hands, and through them the scalding drops trickle ; but only for a moment. In the next, he has dashed them away, and is moving restlessly about the room, looking for his hat.

“Let us go this instant,” he says urgently ; “my poor old man, do you think I would willingly add a feather weight to your burden ? I should never forgive myself if I kept you a second longer from her at such a time ; let us go at once.”

Burgoyne complies ; but under pretext of making some change in his dress, escapes from his friend, for just the few minutes necessary to write and despatch a telegram to the young man’s mother. It runs thus :

“No cause for alarm, but come at once. He is perfectly well, but needs you.”

If, as is to be hoped, Mrs. Byng is still in London, reaping the succession of the old relative whose death-bed she had quitted Florence to attend, his message

will bring her hither within forty-eight hours, and the burden of responsibility, now grown so insupportable, will be shifted from his shoulders. Until those forty-eight hours have elapsed, he must not again let Byng out of his sight.

The day rolls by, the critical ninth day rolls by on its torrid wheels to eventide, and when that eventide comes, it finds Cecilia Wilson running down from Amelia's room, to give the last news of her to the three men and one woman waiting below.

"I think he seems quite satisfied," she says, in answer to the silent hungry looks of question addressed to her, and alluding to the doctor, who is still with the patient; "the strength is maintained; the temperature lower." What a dreadful parrot-sound the two phrases, so familiar to us all in the newspaper bulletins of distinguished men on their death-beds, have during the last week assumed in Burgoyne's ears; "you can speak to him yourself when he comes

down, of course, Jim ; but I am sure he is satisfied."

"She is better!—she is saved!" cries Byng, rushing forward and snatching both Cecilia's hands—"do you say that she is really saved?"

"Oh, are you here still, Mr. Byng? how very kind of you!" replies Cecilia, a tinge of colour rushing over her mealy face—that face, ten days ago, clothed in so many roses—"well, I am afraid he does not go quite so far as that, but he says it is as much as we can expect, and even *I* can see that she is not nearly so restless."

"Thank God!—thank God!"

In the ardour of his thanksgiving he presses her hands closer, instead of dropping them, a fact of which he is entirely unaware, but so is not she ; and who knows, even at that serious moment, what tiny genial hope may slide into her plump heart !

Again this night Burgoyne does not go to bed, from a superstitious fear that

if he does, if he seems to take for granted an improvement, that very taking for granted may annul it—may bring on a relapse. But when the next morning finds no such backsliding to have taken place, when each hour through the cheerfully broadening day brings falling fever and steadying pulse, then indeed he cautiously opens the door of his heart to let a tiny rose-pinioned hope creep in—then at last, on the third night, he stretches his tired limbs in deep slumber upon his bed.

He has received a brief telegram from Mrs. Byng to announce her arrival as fast as boat and train can bring her ; and seven o'clock on Saturday morning—he having sent his despatch to her on the previous Wednesday—finds him pacing the platform of the railway station, awaiting the incoming of the morning express from Turin. He is pacing it alone, for he has thought it best not to reveal to her son the fact of her expected return, not being at all sure in what spirit he will

receive it, nor whether indeed the news of it might not even drive him, in his present unsound state of mind, to fly from the place at her approach.

The morning air, in its early clear coolness, blows sweet here, under the station-roof, unconquered even by engine smoke, and on Jim's face as he walks up and down—careworn as it still is—there comes, now and again, a half-born smile. He is never one to hope very easily, but surely now—now that yet another night has been prosperously tided over, there can, even to him, seem no reasonable ground for doubt that Amelia has turned the corner. Amelia, with the corner turned—Byng, in five minutes wholly off his hands! The only wonder is, that the small smile never comes quite to the birth.

The train is punctual, and almost at its due moment draws up in dusty length at the platform. Its passengers are comparatively few; for at this latening season most of the English are winging home

to their rooky woods ; and he has no difficulty in at once discovering among them the tall smart figure — smart even after forty-eight hours of the unluxurious luxury of a *wagon-lit* — of the lady he is awaiting. As he gives her his hand to help her down the high step, the admiring thought crosses his mind of what a large quantity of fatigue, dust, and uneasiness of mind a radically good-looking Englishwoman, in radically good clothes, can undergo without seeming much the worse for them. Before her neat narrow foot has touched the pavement, a brace of eager questions shoots out of her mouth.

“ Am I in time ? Am I too late ? ”

“ In time for *what* ? Too late for *what* ? ”

“ Has he—has he done anything—anything irrevocable ? Is he—is he ? I suppose that horrid woman has got hold of him ? I suppose that is why you sent for me ! ”

By this time she is safely landed at his

side, which is possibly the reason why he at once lets fall her hand.

“I am not aware that there is any ‘horrid woman’ in the case.”

“Oh, what does it matter what I call her?” cries the mother, fast becoming frantic at the delay in answering her passionate questions. “I will call her what you please; you know perfectly whom I mean; she *has* got hold of him, I suppose. I always knew she would! Did not I tell you so? but is it too late? is there no way of getting him off?”

Now that Burgoyne has a nearer view of Mrs. Byng, he sees that she has a more fagged and travel-worn air than he had at first supposed, and her dusty eyes are fastened upon him with such a hunger of interrogation, that, angered and jarred as he is by her tone, he has not the heart any longer to keep her in suspense.

“If you are alluding to Miss Le Marchant, I may as well tell you at once that she has left Florence.”

“Left Florence! Do you mean to say

that she has run away with someone else?"

She puts the question in all good faith, her lively imagination having easily made the not very wide jump from the fact already established in her own mind of Elizabeth being an adventuress, to the not much more difficult one to swallow, of her having devoured another *fils de famille*, as well as Mrs. Byng's own.

For a moment, Burgoyne turns away, voice and countenance alike beyond his control. He has by no means perfectly recovered either, when he answers—

"Yes, with someone else—she has reached the pitch of turpitude of leaving Florence with her mother."

"She is gone?" cries Mrs. Byng, with an accent of the highest relief and joy; "gone away altogether, do you mean?—oh, thank God!"—then, with a sudden lapse into affright, she adds rapidly—"and he is gone after her?—he is not here?"

"No, he is here."

"Then why has not he come to meet me?"—suspiciously.

"He did not know you were expected."

"You did not tell him?"

"No."

"Why did not you tell him?"

"I did not know how he would take it."

"Do you mean to say"—falling from her former rapidity of utterance to a dismayed incredulous slowness—"that he will not be glad to see me?—that *Willy* will not be glad to see *me*?"

"I mean to say that I am afraid you will not find him very much in sympathy with you; I do not think he will find it easy to hear you speak of Miss Le Marchant in the terms, and make the implication about her that you did just now," replies Jim, avenging by this sentence the wrongs done to Elizabeth, and doing it so well, that a moment later a feeling of compunction comes over him at the success of his own attempt at retributive justice.

Mrs. Byng turns pale.

“Then she has got hold of him?” she says under her breath.

“Got hold of him?” repeats Jim, his ire aroused again, no sooner than allayed by this mode of expression; “you certainly have the most extraordinary way of misconceiving the situation! *Got hold of him?* when she had to leave Florence at a moment’s notice to escape his importunities!”

But at this, Mr. Burgoyne’s auditor looks so hopelessly bewildered that he thinks it the simplest plan at once, in the fewest possible words, to put her in possession of the tale of her son’s achievements and disasters. He does this, partly to stem the torrent of her questions, the form that they have hitherto taken producing in him a feeling of frenzied indignation, which he doubts his own power much longer to conceal—partly in order to set Elizabeth’s conduct with the least possible delay in its true light before her. Surely, when she has been told of her magnanimous renunciation, she will do her justice, will cease to

load her with those hard names and insulting assertions that have made him grind his own teeth to listen to. But in this expectation he soon finds that he is mistaken. The wrath of Mrs. Byng against Elizabeth for having "drawn in" her son, as she persists in stating the case, is surpassed only by indignation at her insolence in having "thrown him over." As to the genuineness of this last action she expresses, it is true, the most complete incredulity.

"It was only to enhance her own value. Do you suppose that she expected him to take her at her word? She thought, of course, that he would follow her—that he would employ detectives—it is a proof"—with an angry laugh—"that he cannot be quite so bad as you make him out, that he has not done so."

"I would not put it into his head if I were you," replies Jim, with an anger no less real, and a merriment no less spurious than her own.

By this time they have reached the hotel; and Jim, having helped his com-

panion out of the fiacre, shows symptoms of leaving her.

"Will not you stay to breakfast with me?" she asks, a little aghast at this unexpected manœuvre; "I cannot make my toilette till the luggage arrives; and I suppose that he"—her eyes wandering wistfully over the hotel front till they rest on her son's closed persiennes—"that he is not up yet; it would be a sin to wake him; do stay with me."

"I am afraid I cannot."

"Why cannot you?"—with an impatient but friendly little mocking imitation of his tone. "You are not"—with a conciliatory smile—"angry with an old hen for standing up for her own chick?"

Jim smiles too.

"I do not think that the old hen need have clucked quite so loudly; but that is not why I am leaving her; I *must* go."

"Where *must* you go?"

"To the Anglo-Américain."

She lifts her eyebrows.

"At this hour?—you forget how early

it is. Well, Amelia *has* got you into good training ; but I can assure you that you will still find her in bed."

He sighs.

"I am afraid that there is not much doubt of that."

"What do you mean?—she is not ill, surely?"—in a tone of lively surprise—"Amelia ill?—impossible!"

He looks at her with an irrational stupefaction. It appears to him now, in the distortion of all objects that the last fortnight has brought, as if Amelia's illness had spread over the whole of his life, as if there had never been a time when she had not been ill, and yet of this event, immense as it seems to him in its duration, the woman before him obviously has never heard. When he comes to think of it, how should she? In point of fact it is not a fortnight since Miss Wilson fell sick, and during that fortnight he himself has not written her a line ; neither, he is equally sure, has her son.

"I am evidently very much behind the

time," she says, noting the, to her, unintelligible astonishment in his face; "but you must remember that I have been kept completely in the dark—has she been ill?"

In answer he tells her, with as much brevity and compression as he had employed in the tale of Elizabeth's disappearance, that of Amelia's illness, often interrupted by her expressions of sympathy. At the end she says:

"I am so thankful I did not hear till she was getting better! It would have made me so wretched to be such a long way off!"

Her adoption of his trouble as her own, an adoption whose sincerity is confirmed by her impulsive seizure of his hand, and the feeling look in her handsome eyes make him forgive the exaggeration of her statement, and go some way towards replacing her in that position in his esteem which her diatribes against Elizabeth had gone near to making her forfeit.

"But it will be all right now," con-

tinues she sanguinely ; “there will be nothing to do but to build up her strength again, and she is young—at least”—as the reminiscence of Amelia’s unyouthful appearance evidently flashes across her mind, of that prematurely middle-aged look which an unequal fortune gives to some plain women — “at least young enough for all practical purposes.”

Whether it be due to the possession of this modified form of juvenility, to an excellent constitution, or to what other reason, certain it is that the next two days go by without any diminution, rather with a sensible and steady increase in Miss Wilson’s favourable symptoms, and, on the afternoon of the latter of these days, Cecilia, in rather impatient answer to Jim’s long daily string of questions about her, says :

“You could judge much better if you saw her yourself. I do not see why you should not see her to-morrow for a minute, that is to say if you would promise not to talk or ask her any questions.”

“But would it be safe?” inquires he, with a tremble in his voice. He desires passionately to see her; until he does he will never believe that she is really going to live; he has a hunger to assure himself that no terrible metamorphosis has passed over her in these nightmare days; and yet, coupled with that hunger, is a deep dread, which translates itself into his next halting words.

“Shall I be — shall I be very much shocked? is she — is she very much changed?”

“She does look pretty bad,” replies Cecilia half sadly, yet with the sub-lying cheerfulness of assured hope; “for one thing she is so wasted. I suppose that that is what makes her look so much older; but then you know Amelia never did look young.”

It is the second time within two days that the fact of his betrothed’s maturity has been impressed upon him, and formerly it would have caused him a pang; but now, of what moment is it

to him that she looks a hundred, if only she is living, and going to live ?

“Has she—has she asked after me ?”

“We do not allow her to speak, but if anyone mentions your name there comes a sort of smile over her face ; such a ridiculous-sized face as it is now !”

The tears have come into Cecilia's large stupid eyes, and Jim himself is, with regard to her, in the position of the great Plantagenet, when he heard the lovely tale of York and Suffolk's high death.

“I blame you not

For hearing this ; I must perforce compound
With mistful eyes ; or they will issue too !”

As he walks away he is filled with a solemn joy, one of those deep serious gladnesses with which not the stranger, no, nor even the close friend or loving kinsman intermeddleth. He is under an engagement to meet Mrs. Byng at a certain hour, but although that hour has already come and passed, he feels that he cannot face all her sincere congratulations without some preparatory toning down of his mood.

The streets, with their gay *va-et-vient*, their cracking whips and shouting drivers, seem all too secular and every-day to match the profundity of his reverent thankfulness. He takes it with him into the great cool church that stands so nigh at hand to his hotel, Santa Maria Novella. The doors fall behind him noiselessly as he enters, shutting out the fiery hot piazza, and the garish noises of the world. In the great dim interior, cold and tranquil, there is the usual sprinkling of tourists peering up at its soaring columns, trying to read themselves, out of their guide-books, into a proper admiration for Cimabue's large-faced Virgin and ugly Bambino, folded, with all its gold and sombre colours, in the dignity of its twice two centuries of gloom. There are the usual three or four blue-trouserred soldiers strolling leisurely about, there is a curly-tailed little dog trotting hither and thither unforbidden, ringing his bell, and there are the invariable tanned peasant-women kneeling at the side-altars. He does not belong to the ancient Church,

but to-day he kneels beside them, and the tears he had hastened away to hide from Cecilia came back to make yet dimmer to his view the details of the dim altar-pieces behind the tall candles. His eye, as he rises to his feet again, falls on the *contadina* nearest him. What is she praying for? In the expansion of his own deep joy he longs to tell her how much he hopes that, whatever it is, she will obtain it. It is not the *contadina* who, standing a little behind, joins him as he turns away from the altar.

“I saw you go into the church,” says Mrs. Byng, her smile growing somewhat diffident as she sees the solemnity of his face, “so I thought I would follow you ; do you mind ? shall I go away ?”

He would, of the two, have preferred that she had not followed him, that he had been given five more minutes to himself ; but he naturally does not say so.

“ Since we are here, shall we go into the cloisters ?” and he assents.

A small Dominican monk, with a smile

and a bunch of keys, is opening a door to some strangers, prowling like our friends about the church. The latter follow, the little monk enveloping them too in his civil smile. Down some steps into the great cloister, under whose arches pale frescoes cover the ancient walls—where in Florence are there not frescoes?—and the hands that painted them seem all to have wielded their brushes in that astounding fifteenth century, which was to Florence's life what May is to Italy's year. For some moments they stand silent, side by side, perhaps picking out familiar scenes from among the sweet faded groups—a slim Rebecca listening to Eliezar's tale, and looking maiden pleasure at his gifts; a shivering Adam and Eve chased out of Paradise; an Adam and Eve dismally digging and stitching respectively; Old Testament stories that time has blurred, that weather—even in this dry air—has rubbed out and bedimmed, and that yet, in many cases, still tell their curious faint tale decipherably.

“Good news this evening, I hope?” says Mrs. Byng presently, growing a little tired of her companion’s taciturnity, being indeed always one of those persons who are of opinion that the gold of which silence is said to be made has a good deal of alloy in it.

“I am to see her to-morrow.”

He speaks almost under his breath, either because he has no great confidence in his voice, if he employ a higher key, or because there seems to him a certain sanctity in this promised meeting on the kindly hither side of the grave which has so lately yawned.

Mrs. Byng is much too old and intimate a friend of Jim’s not to have been pretty well aware of the state of his feelings during the past eight years, though certainly not through any communication from him. So it is, perhaps, scarcely to be wondered at that she presently says, in a tone tinged with admiring surprise :

“How fond you are of her !”

He receives the remark in a jarred

silence, his eye resting on the square of neglected graves in the middle of the cloister, how unlike our turfy quads and lawns. A commonplace nineteenth-century photographer, with his vulgar camera planted on the time-worn stones, is evidently trying to persuade the little monk to pose for his picture. The gentle-looking Fra laughs, and draws up his cowl, then lowers it again, folding his arms, and trying various postures.

“You are so much fonder of her than you were !”

This speech—though such is certainly far from the good-natured speaker’s intention—stings Burgoyne like a whip-lash.

“I was always fond of her—I always thought her the very best woman in the world ; you know !”—with an accent of almost anguished appeal—“that I always thought her the very best woman in the world.”

“Oh, yes ; of course, I know you did,” replies she, astonished and concerned at the evident and extreme distress of his

tone. "That is not quite the same thing as being *fond* of her, is it? But"—with a laugh that is at once uneasy and reassuring—"what does that matter *now*? *Now* your fondness for her is as indisputable as Tilburina's madness; and, for my part, I always think people get on quite as well, if not better, afterwards, if they do not begin quite so volcanically."

But her light and well-meant words fail to remove the painful impression from her hearer's mind. Has she, during all these years, been crediting him with a wish for Amelia's death, that she should be so much astonished at his thankfulness for her being given back to him?

"I believe that this illness is the best thing that could have happened to you both," continues Mrs. Byng, feeling uncomfortably that she has not been happy in her choice of a topic, and yet unable to leave it alone. "It will have drawn you so much together: in fact"—again laughing nervously—"I think we are all looking up. As I told you, after the first shock, Willy

really was rather glad to see me ; and you would not believe how discreetly I handle the burning subject—yes, everything is on the mend, and we are all going to have a lovely time, as the Yankees say !”





CHAPTER XXX.

“The world’s a city full of straying streets,
And Death the market-place where each one meets.”

THE words are scarcely out of Mrs. Byng’s mouth before she adds, in a changed key, and with an altered direction of the eyes—

“Is this person looking for you? He seems to be coming straight towards us.”

Jim turns his head at her speech, and at once recognises in the figure hastening towards them the porter of the Anglo-Américain hotel. The man looks strangely, and carries a slip of paper, unfolded and open, in his hand.

In a second Jim has sprung to his side, has snatched the paper, and is staring at its contents. They are hardly legible, scrawled

tremblingly with a pencil, and for a moment he cannot make them out. Then, as he looks, in one horrible flash their import has sprung into his eyes and brain.

"She is gone ; come to us !"

Mrs. Byng is reading too, over his shoulder.

In going over the scene in memory afterwards, he believes that she gives a sort of scream, and says, "Oh, what does it mean ? It is not true !" But at the time he hears, he knows nothing.

He is out of the church ; he is in the fiacre waiting at the door : he is tearing through the streets, with the hot summer air flowing in a quick current against his face. He thinks afterwards at what a pace the horse must have been going, and how the poor jade must have been lashed to keep it up to that useless speed. At the time he thinks nothing, he feels nothing. He rushes through the court of the hotel, rushes through what seem to be people ; he thinks afterwards that they must have been waiters and chambermaids, and that there

comes a sort of compassionate murmur from them as he passed. He is up the stairs, the three flights ; as he tears up, three steps at a time, there comes across his numbed intelligence a flash of wonder why they always give Amelia the worst room. He is at that door, outside which he has spent so many hours of breathless listening ; he need no longer stay outside it now. It is open, inviting him in. He is across that, as yet, unpassed threshold, that threshold over which he was to have stepped in careful, soft-footed joy to-morrow. He has pushed through the people—why must there be people everywhere?—of whom the room seems full, unnecessarily full ; he is at the bedside. Across the foot a figure seems thrown—he learns afterwards that *that* is Sybilla. Another figure is prostrate on the floor, heaving, in dreadful dry sobs ; that is Cecilia. A third is standing upright and tearless, looking down upon what, an hour ago, was his most patient daughter. They have let her alone now—have ceased to tease her. They no

longer hold a looking-glass to her pale mouth, or beat her tired feet, or pour useless cordials between her lips. They have ceased to cry out upon her name, having realized that she is much too far away to hear them. Neither does he cry out. He just goes and stands by the father, and takes his thin old hand in his; and together they gaze on that poor temple, out of which the spirit that was so much too lovely for it has fled. Later on they tell him how it came about; later on, when they are all sitting huddled in the little dark *salon*. Cecilia is the spokeswoman, and Sybilla puts in sobbing corrections now and again.

"She was sitting up the moment before; the nurse was holding her propped up—she said she was so tired of lying. She had been quite laughing, the nurse said."

"Almost laughing," corrects Sybilla, who has forgotten to lie down upon her sofa, and is sitting on a hard chair like anyone else.

"Quite laughing," continues Cecilia, "at her own arm for being so thin. She

had pushed up her sleeve to look at it, and had said something—something quite funny, only the nurse could not remember the exact words—and then, all in a minute, she called out, in quite an altered voice, ‘The salts! Quick! Quick!’ and her head just fell back, and she was gone!”

“And she had not bid one of us good-bye!” cries Sybilla, breaking into a loud wail.

Then comes a dreadful and incongruous flash of that ridiculous, which is the underlining to all our tragedies, across Jim’s mind at this last lament. The going, “taking no farewell,” naturally seems to Sybilla the most terrible feature in the whole case, to her who has so repeatedly taken heart-rending last farewells of her family.

“Who would ever have thought that I should have survived her?” pursues Sybilla, still sobbing noisily, and without the least attempt at self-control. Cecilia, who is sitting with her head on her arms

resting on the table, lifts her tear-blurred face and answers this apostrophe in a voice choked with weeping.

“Jim always did ; he always said that you would see us all out.”

Again that dreadful impulse towards mirth assails Burgoyne. Is it possible that, at such an hour, he can feel a temptation to laugh out loud? But, later again, this horrible mood passes ; later, when they have all grown more composed, when their tears run more gently, when their voices are less suffocated, and they are telling each other little anecdotes of her, aiding each other's memories to recall half-effaced traits of her homely kindness, of her noiseless self-denials, of her deep still piety.

They bring out her photographs, mourning over their being so few, and such old and long-ago ones. There are effigies by the dozen of Cecilia, and even touching presentments of Sybilla stretched in wasted grace upon her day bed ; but it had never occurred to anyone—least of

all to Amelia herself—that there is any need for *her* image to be perpetuated. And now they are searching out, as treasures most precious, the scanty faded likenesses that exist of her, planning how they can be enlarged, and repeated, and daintily framed, and generally done homage and tender reverence to.

Jim listens, occasionally putting in a low word or two, when appealed to to confirm or correct the details of some little story about her. But it seems to him as if his anguish only begins when the stream of their reminiscences turns into the channel of her love for him.

“Oh, Jim, she *was* fond of you! We were none of us anywhere, compared to you; she worshipped the ground you trod upon. We all knew—did not we, Sybilla?—did not we, father?—when you used to be away for so long, and wrote to her so seldom—— Oh, I know!”—hastily—“That you were not to blame, that you were in out-of-the-way places, where there was no post: but there were

sometimes long gaps between your letters; and we always knew—did not we?—when she had heard from you by her face, long before she spoke.”

Next it is—

“How she fired up if anyone said anything slightingly of you: she never cared in the least if one abused herself; she always thought she quite deserved it; but if anybody dared to say the least disparaging thing of *you*”—it is pretty evident, though at the moment in his agony of preoccupation the idea does not occur to Jim, that this has not been an uncommon occurrence—“she was like a lioness at once.”

“The saddest thing of all,” says Sybilla, taking up the antiphonal strain, “is that she should have died just as she was beginning to be so happy!”

Just beginning to be so happy! And he might have made her heavenly happy so easily, since she asked so little—for eight years. The groan he utters is low in proportion to the depth of the fountain whence it springs, and they do not hear

it. If they did, they would in mercy stop ; instead they go on.

“Did you ever see anything so radiant as she was—that last fortnight? She used to say that she was quite ashamed of being so much more fortunate than any-one else, she seemed always trying to make up to us for not being so happy as she. Oh, she was happy that last fortnight!”

This time he does not groan, he seems to himself to have passed into that zone of suffering which cannot be expressed or alleviated by the utterance of any sound. Perhaps, by-and-by, Cecilia dimly divines something, some faint shadow of what he is enduring ; for she begins with well-intentioned labour to try to assert lamely that Amelia had always been happy, well, *fairly* happy, as happy as most people. You could not expect, in this dreadful world, to be always in the best of spirits, but she had never complained. And, oh ! that last fortnight she *had* been happy, it was a pleasure to see her ! And,

oh, what a comfort it must be now to Jim to think that it was all owing to him.

She puts out her hand kindly to him as she speaks, and he takes it, and silently wrings it in acknowledgment of the endeavour—however clumsy—to lay balm upon that now immedicable wound.

He stays most of the night with them ; and when at length, overcome with weariness and sorrow, they rise from their grief-stricken postures to go to bed, he kisses them all solemnly, even the old man. He has never kissed any of them before, except once or twice Cecilia on some return of his from the Antipodes, and because she seemed to expect it.

* * * *

Three days later Burgoyne leaves Florence ; and, as his arrival in the City of Flowers had been motivated by Amelia alive, so is his departure to companion her dead.

END OF PART ONE.



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